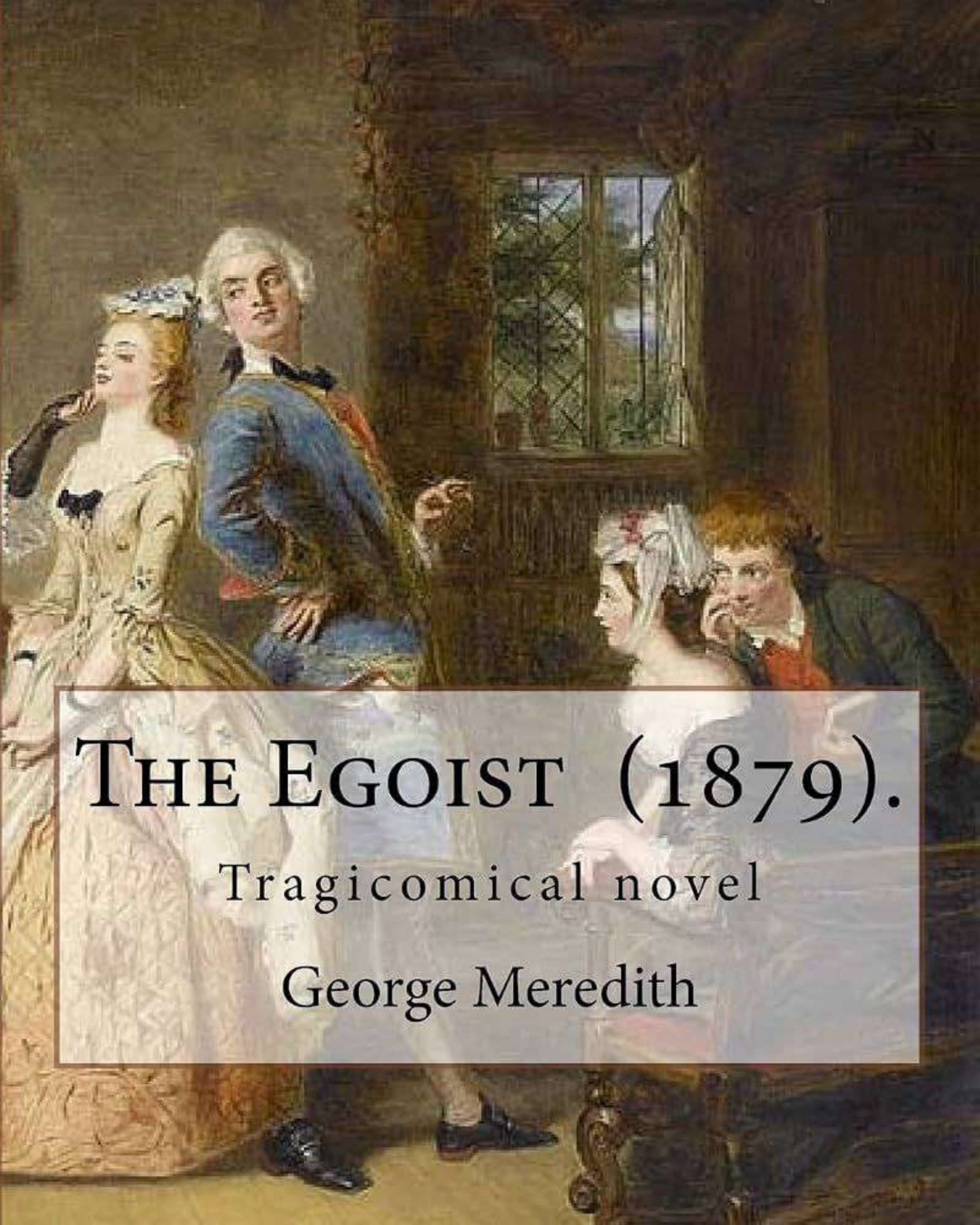

The Egoist (1879).

Tragicomical novel

George Meredith

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE EGOIST

GEORGE MEREDITH was born in 1828, the son of a Portsmouth tailor. He was educated in local schools and later at the Moravian School at Neuwied near Coblenz. In 1844 he was articled to a solicitor but turned instead to writing, publishing *Poems* in 1851 and his first work of fiction, *The Shaving of Shagpat*, in 1856. In 1849 he had married Mary Ellen Nicolls, Thomas Love Peacock's widowed daughter. After a few years the marriage foundered and, having left Meredith, Mary Ellen died in 1861. In 1864 he married Marie Vulliamy. From his first introduction to the literary world, Meredith became a hard-working man of letters, acting for many years as reader for Chapman Hall, and devoting much time to journalism. This, however, did not interrupt the flow of his novels. The best known were *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), *Evan Harrington or He Would be a Gentleman* (1861), *Emilia in England* (1864), later re-published as *Sandra Belloni* (1886), *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871), *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), *The Egoist* (1879), *The Tragic Comedians* (1880), and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). His most important works of non-fiction were his volume of poems, *Modern Love* (1862) and his *Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (1897). After a long period of relative neglect, Meredith became famous and respected in his old age, and in 1905 he received the Order of Merit. He died in 1909.

GEORGE WOODCOCK was editor of *Now* from 1940 to 1947 and of *Canadian Literature* from 1959 to 1977. He has taught at Canadian and American universities, has received many literary awards for his books, and in 1973 was awarded the Molson Prize, the highest Canadian award for achievements in the arts and humanities. He received the UBC Medal for Popular Biography in 1973 and again in 1976 and was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1968, and later an FRGS. He has published some eighty books – on travel, history, verse, literary criticism and biographical studies. They include *Anarchism* (Penguin 1963), *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (Penguin 1970), *Herbert Read*, *Who Killed the British Empire?, Gabriel Dumont* , *Notes on Visitations*, *Peoples of the Coast*, *Thomas Merton*, *Monk and Poet*, *The Canadians*, *The World of Canadian Writing*, *British Columbia: A History*, *Collected Poems* and *Letter to the Past.* He has also edited William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and Herman Melville's *Typee* for Penguin Classics.

GEORGE MEREDITH

The Egoist

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY GEORGE WOODCOCK

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Introduction

1

The Egoist is George Meredith's most self-consistent and characteristic novel. It is the work in which he makes the least concession to the ways of Victorian novelists and to the predilections of Victorian readers; in which he reveals most openly the tensions between his own nature and his philosophy of living; in which he exposes with the most accurate and merciless of laughter the distortions of feeling which a society of self-seekers imposes on its devotees.

The Egoist was not the most popular of Meredith's novels among his contemporaries; that distinction was reserved for *Diana of the Crossways*, a much weaker book, in which he compromised notably with the sentimentality he himself always denounced. It was not even Meredith's own favourite, perhaps because in writing it he had exposed too much of himself; he gave his preference to that heroic failure, *Beauchamp's Career*, a strange combination of probable politics and unlikely passion.

Yet *The Egoist* is the book for which Meredith is most regarded at that crucial period in a writer's fame, the second half-century after his death; today it is probably more read and certainly more discussed than any of his other novels. Like Congreve's *The Way of the World*, which Meredith regarded highly, and Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*, which as far as I know he never even mentioned, it is among those *jeux d'esprit* in which art and intellect dance together in forms that are literature's nearest effective approach to

abstraction. In Meredith's other works his mannerisms and artifices perplex and annoy; in *The Egoist*, for once, they are entirely appropriate, entirely absorbed into a carefully integrated structure of speech and thought.

The thought is important, for Meredith's intent in writing *The Egoist* was far from that of producing a work of art for art's sake. Wilde's occasional propagandizing for a hedonistic libertarianism may perhaps be dismissed as a lapse of aestheticist consistency; Meredith never ceased to be – in his own way – a self-consciously didactic writer, and even *The Egoist* reflects his didacticism. He had definite and detailed views on the need to live naturally. In his novels the physical exertions in which he rather loudly indulged in daily life were transferred to the positive characters, and in such a context became the symbols of a healthy attitude to existence. He had, moreover, strong opinions on that malignant sickness of Victorian England, the class system, and the agonies of snobbery and social pride which he suffered within himself were transformed into fiction so that they might be observed and analysed with exemplary effect.

More tenuously, in the shadow of the Meredith concerned with moral-social problems, there lived a political Meredith. Though James Thomson called him 'the Browning of our novelists', and Wilde slyly amended the definition into his famous quip, 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning', the only attitude that Meredith and Browning tangibly shared was a common political concern for the Italian Risorgimento, which aroused Meredith's enthusiasm, sent him to the front as a correspondent during the abortive war between Italy and Austria in the summer of 1866, and resulted in two romantic novels, *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittorio*. At home Meredith professed himself a Radical, but a sure instinct told him that writers are best outside political activity and his one burst of electoral campaigning, when he canvassed for his friend F. A. Maxse at Southampton in 1867, was most important for the literary use he made of it in *Beauchamp's Career*.

At least one Marxist critic has devoted a lengthy book to arguing Meredith's right to be considered a class-conscious revolutionary novelist (Jack Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, London, 1956). Yet, though the political scene figures in most of Meredith's novels, in part for the good reason that in that age of Reform by easy stages politics were the active concern of the kind of people he portrays, his principles were diluted in practice by the fact that he was a hard-working man of letters who did not always show very delicate scruples as to how his pen was used; for years, as an anonymous editorialist for the Tory *Ipswich Journal*, he wrote for money against his avowed political allies.

His concern with class was genuine and passionate – as it has been with so many English novelists of the past two centuries – but it was rarely expressed in direct political terms, mainly because he was less interested in the machinery of politics than he was in the more delicate mechanisms by which social conventions affected individual men and women, shaping their outlooks and perverting their feelings. Even in *Beauchamp's Career* the actual election is less important as a political event than as a symbol of Nevil Beauchamp's attempt to break free of the conventions of his own upbringing and of the effect of that attempt on his relationships with others of his class. In *The Egoist* politics echo hardly at all; there is merely Sir Willoughby's vague intention to enter Parliament in some unspecified future. But the novel would not exist at all if it were not for Meredith's passionate opinions about the effect of Victorian ruling-class conventions upon human feelings. The very first sentence confesses the fact:

> Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-rooms of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing.

In other words, Meredith is seeking deliberately to rise above the political struggle, even to the extent that it figures in *Beauchamp's Career* and to illuminate the pretensions of the most powerful class within the very citadel of security which its members have built out of their social conventions. The paradox of the great Egoist, Sir Willoughby Patterne, is that he is dependent for his self-assurance on the good opinion of others, and to gain and keep that he must always make the appearance of being successful in terms of the prevailing fashion. He manipulates conventions for his personal ends, but in turn becomes their prisoner within the gaol of his own social prestige.

2

The peculiar flavour of *The Egoist* comes largely from this fact that it is a study of social pretensions within a stable situation. Its characters are limited deliberately to a group of people close enough in terms of class to come together naturally in an extended house party; no major character is socially insecure, ascending or descending the ladder of class.

Thus *The Egoist* in fact differs from the earlier novels not only in the elimination of the more flamboyantly

heroic aspects of the struggle against social conventions, but also in abandoning, as fictional mechanisms, acute class differences and extreme snobbery; both exist in the world of *The Egoist*, but they seldom surface, to make a telling point, as in Sir Willoughby's treatment of his distant relative, Lieutenant Patterne.

By contrast, Meredith's first novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, introduces class in a very direct way through Richard's marriage to a girl of lower status, which leads to his later troubles, and also contains one of Meredith's earliest disquisitions on the nature of snobbery.

> I now see [says Adrian Harley Richard's cousin] that the national love of a lord is less subservience than a form of self-love; putting a gold-lace hat on one's image, as it were, to bow to it. I see, too, the admirable wisdom of our system: – could there be a finer balance of power than in a community where men intellectually nil, have lawful vantage and a gold-lace hat on? How soothing it is to Intellect – that noble rebel, as the Pilgrim has it – to stand, and bow, and know itself superior!

In fact, snobs are of two kinds, those who – as Adrian suggests – can look on others' social eminence with satisfaction, and those who wish to share that eminence. Proust was inclined to be a snob of the first kind, Meredith – outside his persona as a writer – of the second. But he was too intelligent for his attitude not to be ambivalent. In later years he elaborately attempted to conceal the fact that he came of a line of tailors, yet in *Evan Harrington* (1861), rather obviously subtitled *He Would Be a Gentleman*, he wrote daringly near the bone by telling the story of a tailor's son striving to ascend the social ladder. If Evan Harrington is a social climber, Richmond Roy, the father of the hero in *Harry Richmond* (1871), is the grossest kind of social impostor, and in others of Meredith's works the struggle of lower middle class men, stained by their involvement in trade, to rise above their origins by effort or fraud, is important and is always the subject of comedy, a comedy which doubtless gained piquancy in the writing from the fact that Meredith was exposing his own most sensitive nerve-ends.

The most curious of these studies in snobbery occurs in one of Meredith's least known works, *The House on the Beach*, a novella of unusual brevity (40,000 words) and almost Dickensian quaintness. Published in 1877, it became a kind of burlesque transition from the earlier novels to *The Egoist*, which appeared two years later.

The novel is set in a shabby little seaside resort, the minor Cinque port of Crikswich. Martin Tinman, the bailiff of Crikswich, is a retired tradesman who dreams that his position as a very minor royal official will eventually lead to his acceptance at Court. Gradually he builds up a life of fantasy centring upon hours of posturing secretly before a cheval-glass in the Court suit he has bought in preparation for the event. The summons in fact never comes, but it seems to Tinman that the achievement of his ambition may have been brought a stage nearer when Van Diemen Smith and his daughter Annette arrive in Crikswich.

Smith is a friend of the distant past, returning with a fortune from exile; long ago he deserted from the British army and fled to Australia, where he made good. Tinman knows the secret of Smith's desertion, which could still result in imprisonment, and, having been rejected as a possible spouse by all the wealthy and marriageable women of the district, he coldly proceeds to blackmail his old friend into allowing him to marry Annette. Smith resorts to parental prerogative in overruling Annette's growing unwillingness, until he quarrels with Tinman and refuses to allow the marriage to proceed. Tinman writes the letter of betrayal, but before he can post it, a great storm springs up in the Channel and his house on the beach is threatened by the mounting waves. Tinman is in the grip of his dream, posturing before his mirror and oblivious of the winds and waters raging outside. In the nick of time he is saved by a rescue party dispatched by Van Diemen Smith, and carried away from the collapsing house which, with all his possessions, is engulfed by the waves.

For a moment, after his rescue, Tinman stands on the sea wall in full view of his fellow citizens.

> In this exposed position, the wind, whose pranks are endless when it is once up, seized and blew Martin Tinman's dressing-gown wide as two violently flapping wings on each side of him, and finally over his head. Van Diemen turned a pair of stupefied flat eyes on Herbert, who cast a shy look at the ladies. Tinman had sprung down. But not before the world, in one tempestuous glimpse, had caught sight of the Court suit.

The person whom this exposure of the pretensions of her former suitor affects most strongly is Annette, fully conscious now of liberation from the marital tyranny which had threatened her.

> It… seemed to her the most wonderful running together of opposite things ever known on this earth. The young lady was ashamed of her laughter, but she was deeply indebted to it, for never was mind made so clear by that beneficent exercise.

The 'opposite things' which Annette perceives are of course the natural impulses represented by the storm and the unnatural pretensions which, in destroying Tinman's house and so ludicrously exposing his

pretensions, it defeats.

The House on the Beach was completed late in 1876 and published in the *New Quarterly Magazine* in January 1877. By that time Meredith was already preparing for his famous lecture at the London Institution on 'The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit'. The lecture was delivered on 1 February 1877 and published in the April issue of the *New Quarterly Magazine*, though it did not achieve book form for another twenty years, being finally published in 1897 as *An Essay on Comedy*. Before 1877 had ended, Meredith was already at work on *The Egoist*, which was finished in February 1879 and published in October that year. The fact that *The House on the Beach* was published, the lecture on Comedy delivered, and *The Egoist* commenced, all in the same year, signifies more than a temporal link between these works. It shows the extent to which, at a time when he was despairing of the wide popularity which came to him eight years later with *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith for a brief period abandoned compromise with the tastes of his time, not only by writing the most dazzlingly intellectual of all his novels, but also by developing to their logical extremity the ideas on egoism, on sentimentality, and on the function of comedy, which had been part of his equipment almost from the beginning of his literary career. It may also be that Meredith, who completed *The Egoist* in his fifty-first year, had reached the height of his creative powers and wrote in consciousness of this fact; certainly nothing that he produced in his remaining twenty years of active writing showed a comparable sureness of touch.

On the most obvious level the link between *The House on the Beach* and *The Egoist* can be seen in the peculiar twisting of the Meredithian sexual theme which dominates the plots of both novella and novel. The heroines, Annette and Clara, are both engaged to wealthy and egotistical men, who are the victims of their own overweening pretensions. In each case a father – for reasons of his own – seeks to force the heroine to keep her troth to a man she has grown to despise; in each case the egoist is exposed, so that his neighbours and friends see him at last for the empty being he is; by this exposure and by her own recognition of the freedom conferred by a comic view of her situation, the girl is liberated. Finally, there is in each novel a modest aspirant to the heroine's hand (in *The House on the Beach* an actual journalist and in *The Egoist* an aspiring journalist) who waits until the comedy of egoism is played out and his worthiness can triumph.

Both Martin Tinman and Sir Willoughby Patterne are emotional vampires; they seek to establish and sustain their pretensions by preying on the emotions of others, while all they have to offer are the mechanical responses of sham sentiment. In each case their victims or potential victims include the whole of their immediate circle, but the prime victim is a woman. This pattern of the victimization of woman appears in most of Meredith's major novels; it was complemented, outside his fiction, by a genuine concern for the liberation of women from the social and legal discriminations which they suffered in the Victorian era. The New Women who accepted *Diana of the Crossways* as a fictional manifesto for the cause of feminism were not entirely wrong.

Yet they were only partially right, since the battle of the sexes was never neatly resolved in any of Meredith's books. It was still being fought out in his last novel, *The Amazing Marriage*, whose writing bridged a very long span, from its beginning in 1879 immediately after *The Egoist* was completed, to its final publication in 1895. Even in this last novel, some familiar types of *The Egoist* period are still present: the vain Fleetwood, who, like Sir Willoughby, has been jilted by one woman and regards the winning of the heroine mainly as a victory to re-establish his own superiority; the selfish and calculating guardian uncle (the parent-substitute) who forces the marriage of Carinthia and Fleetwood; Carinthia herself, originally as innocent in the ways of the world as Clara Middleton, but quick to develop in understanding when Fleetwood deserts her, and ready to reject him when he undergoes a sentimental revulsion and wishes to resume their relationship. Carinthia eventually shows her independence by going off with her brother to support the Carlist rebels in Spain; meanwhile Fleetwood dies in a monastery and Carinthia, returning from Spain, marries a Welsh mine-owner whose modest, unspectacular virtues provide the necessary contrast to the rather flamboyant villainy of Fleetwood.

It is a sign of the growing importance in Meredith's imaginative vision of the liberation of women as the end of the sexual struggle that the emphatic male hero vanishes from his novels in 1876, when Nevil Beauchamp throws his stormy life away rescuing the child whom Meredith describes as an 'insignificant bit of mudbank life'. From that point the driving passion that characterized such relatively conventional heroes as Beauchamp and Richard Feverel is given only to the villains, who expend it in the service of their vanity; the quiet dependable men whom Clara, Diana and Carinthia eventually marry in recognition of their devotion are the precursors of the heroes and anti-heroes, men without passion and emphasis, who appear in so many twentieth century novels.

In Meredith's novels, sexual passion is never in fact so important as sexual domination, which may often be a matter of the coldest calculation. No censorial decision was more absurd than that which led Mudie's Library to kill the prospects of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* in consequence – according to Meredith – 'of the urgent remonstrances of several respectable families who objected to it as dangerous and wicked and damnable…'. On the other hand, if *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* or *Diana of the Crossways* or *The Egoist* could have been banned as a threat to the Victorian patriarchal family, there might have been logic in the act. Yet the outspoken feminism of Meredith's later years was a by-product rather than a cause of the sexual conflicts represented in his novels. A didactic writer, in that he recognized and sought to use the power of comedy in affecting the outlooks and hence the actions of men, Meredith was not a reforming propagandist. Here there was a sharp distinction between him and a writer like Bernard Shaw, who criticized him from the Fabian point of view. Shaw would use a play quite deliberately to discuss an immediate social problem and to implant in the minds of his audience the idea of a concrete remedy. The problems that concerned Meredith were not so easily solved; placed in an unavoidable social setting, they were essentially problems of personal awareness. The therapy of comedy was not expected to reform societies; it was expected to cure individuals of certain malformations of feeling.

None, Meredith recognized, was in greater need of therapy than himself. Sir Willoughby, he once told a young writer, 'is all of us', and there is no doubt that he exposed more of himself in his negative characters than in his positive ones, who were much more likely to take their characteristics from his friends, for example, F. A. Maxse, Leslie Stephen, Robert Louis Stevenson.

It is when we touch this sensitive problem of the materials out of which Meredith fabricated his novels, and particularly *The Egoist*, that we come near the roots of his view on the war of the sexes. His relationship with the Peacock family, in particular, is central to any consideration of his characteristic moral preoccupations, of the content of his novels, and even in his ways of writing.

The relationship began when Meredith, a lawyer's clerk of twenty and yet untried as a writer, met Edward Gryffydh Peacock, the son of the author of *Nightmare Abbey*. The two young men were members of a literary circle which gathered around the bohemian lawyer Richard Charnock, to whom Meredith was articled, and they contributed to a handwritten *Monthly Journal*, in which appeared Meredith's first works to receive even the limited publicity of a privately circulated magazine. Edward Peacock's widowed sister, Mary Ellen Nicolls, was also a contributor to the *Monthly Journal*. Soon, in 1849, she became Meredith's wife; he was twenty-one and she was seven years older.

Meredith's marriage brought him close to Thomas Love Peacock, particularly when the financial difficulties of the young couple made them accept his temporary hospitality. In human terms the experiment was almost disastrous. Peacock, a man who liked comfort, quiet and peace of mind, resented Meredith's exuberance and was distressed by the openness with which financial and emotional difficulties were aired by his daughter and son-in-law. The two men disagreed politically; as a crowning infliction, Meredith smoked incessantly and Peacock detested tobacco.

Yet, despite this temperamental incompatibility, Peacock's literary outlook impressed itself strongly on Meredith at this formative stage in his development as a writer. As late as 1872, almost a quarter of a century after their first meeting, he wrote for the *Graphic* a series of intensely Peacockian dialogues entitled *Up to Midnight*, and his predilection for developing his novels through scenes of dramatic conversation, to which the narrative was subordinated, became the mechanism for an intellectualization of the novel along lines which Peacock had prefigured. Nevertheless, he advanced on Peacock, in that his characters were never merely the mouthpieces of *idées fixes*; they projected clearly individualized temperaments; they learnt from experience, and if they did not always grow in the process, at least they gained in self-awareness, which can hardly be said of any of Peacock's totally static characters.

It is in *The Egoist* that the Peacockian dialogue is most effectively naturalized into an instrument of Meredithian analysis. Meredith's dialogue is not necessarily more realistic in its texture than Peacock's. One cannot imagine any two living creatures conversing as Sir Willoughby and Laetitia Dale do at their most sententious. But it does chart the emotional lives of those strange beings of Meredith's imagination in such a way that we are aware not of mere intellectual crotchets, but also of genuine feelings, of worthy and unworthy calculations, of cracks in the carapace of affectation through which we can feel a beating of human blood. In fact, it is one of Meredith's great originalities that he can give a highly poised and intellectualized dialogue such transparency that in the end it becomes more revealing of the inner motives of the speakers than a deliberately realistic conversation would be. Virginia Woolf, the daughter of Meredith's intimate friend Leslie Stephen, defined the effect of this achievement when she remarked that in *The Egoist*, 'Meredith pays us a supreme compliment to which as novel-readers we are little accustomed.… He imagines us capable of disinterested curiosity in the behaviour of our kind.'

But Peacock was not merely, for Meredith, a father-in-law turned into a literary parent. He also became the model for one of the principal characters of *The Egoist*. Dr Middleton, Clara's father, is a classical scholar who speaks and looks as Peacock did, who harbours his Tory prejudices, who shares his love of wine and food and ease, and who displays the same ruthlessness in his efforts to avoid any human complications that may disturb the calm he regards as essential for his scholarly work.

The formal elaboration of *The Egoist*, paralleling the elaboration of conventions within which the appropriately named Patterne dances his pompous minuet of life, is characterized by the triangular grouping of characters: Willoughby–Clara–Laetitia; Willoughby–Clara–Vernon; Clara–Vernon–Horace; Willoughby–Mrs Jenkinson–Clara. The shifting relations within and between such triangles are the choreography of the work as a whole. Most interesting of all the triangles is that of Willoughby–Clara–Dr Middleton, the triad which provides the clues to the genesis of *The Egoist*.

In this key triad Dr Middleton alone is immediately recognizable as a character rather faithfully derived from a model in real life. Willoughby and Clara have gone through many rebirths before they are incarnated in *The Egoist*, but their beginnings are to be found in Meredith's own past, in the early triangle of Peacock–Mary Ellen–Meredith. Meredith's marriage with Mary Ellen foundered in the conflict of two proud intellects; in 1857, eight years after they had married, she left him for Henry Wallis, the pre-Raphaelite fellow-traveller whose livid painting of *The Death of Chatter-ton* is to be seen in the Tate Gallery. When Mary Ellen wished to return to him, Meredith proudly refused a reconciliation, and in 1861 she died, unhappy and alone.

Neither Mary Ellen's departure nor her death was for Meredith the end of the relationship. It dominated the rest of his life, haunting him with the images of her misery and his inflexibility, but as the years went on these twin spectres underwent curious transformations. The most literal rendering of the lost marriage was Meredith's long poem, *Modern Love*. The actual incidents described in that poem are already somewhat changed from those in Meredith's marriage, but we cannot doubt that the conclusion he expresses in analysing the failure of the imagined love relationship sprang from his own experience:

> Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
> The union of this ever-diverse pair;
> These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
> Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
> Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
> They wandered once, clear as the dew on flowers,
> But they fed not on the advancing hours:
> Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
> Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
> Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
> Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
> When hot for certainties in this our life!

Meredith suggests that he and Mary Ellen, proud and independent spirits, were diminished in the net of marriage until, using the mind to wound and dominate each other, they betrayed the heart. There is already much of *The Egoist* here. Sir Willoughby, seeking a certainty through conventions and sentiments, but incapable of real love, gets in the end the dusty answer of losing Clara and marrying the second-best lady, a fading Laetitia who no longer even adores him.

Even before *Modern Love* was written and before Mary Ellen was dead, Meredith had begun to develop another aspect of the great marital failure which in various forms dominated the rest of his life as a writer. *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* appeared in 1859, the year after Mary Ellen's elopement with Henry Wallis, and the story of Sir Austin Feverel, Richard's father, parallels extraordinarily that of Meredith himself.

> The outline of the Baronet's story was by no means new. He had a wife, and he had a friend. His marriage was for love; his wife was a beauty, his friend was a poet. Sir Austin Feverel did nothing by halves. His wife had his whole heart, and his friend all his confidence.

The poet lives in the household; he and the wife are thrown often together. 'In time he touched his guitar in her chamber, and they played Rizzio and Mary together.' Sir Austin learns of their faithlessness.

> … He forgave the man; he put him aside as too poor for his wrath. The woman he could not forgive. She had sinned every way. Simple ingratitude to a benefactor was a pardonable transgression, for he was not one to recount, and crush the culprit under the heap of his good deeds. But her he had raised to be his equal, and he judged her as his equal. She had blackened the world's fair aspect for him.

The monstrosity of Sir Austin's self-love is evident. In terms of the novel his unfortunate marriage is mainly important as the motivation for the elaborate upbringing, designed to make him proof against the ravages of love, which is inflicted on his son Richard and which breeds its inevitable rebellion. The rejected wife appears in the latter part of the novel as a dim, veiled figure, but certainly a victim figure.

Apart from his temperamental egoism, Sir Austin bears no obvious resemblance to Meredith; it is mainly their situations that are similar. But it is significant of a division in Meredith between the private man and the writer (a division which recurs through his life), that he continued to exclude Mary Ellen from his life at the same time as he implied a condemnation of Sir Austin for similarly excluding the erring Lady Feverel.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel in fact makes it clear that, if Meredith's pride would not allow him to admit publicly any blame for the failure of his marriage, his conscience nagged, and to that continually nagging conscience we owe the series of relationships between the sexes in successive novels in which the man more clearly becomes the unfeeling tyrant and the woman the potential victim. The main shift that takes place in the relationship – apart from the rather minor one of making Clara a yet unmarried girl, and therefore a jilt rather than an adulteress – is that the woman's defection ceases to be an act of betrayal or weakness, and becomes an act of liberation, the liberation of the feelings from the rule of convention and sterile sentiment.

Thus Meredith's view of the relationship of the sexes, as symbolic of the wider relationship between freedom and the tyranny of custom, led him far from the real-life origin of his preoccupations. Dr Middleton, an essentially minor character, could safely be modelled on Peacock. But Clara Middleton had grown as far from Mary Ellen Nicoll as Meredith's views on the fate of women had changed since the agony he exorcized in *Modern Love*.

The Egoist, in its construction, has the kind of economy which is more usual in drama than in fiction. It is true that like almost every book that Meredith wrote, its entrance is protected by a rather fearsome *chevaux-de-frise* in the form of a preface on comedy, heavy with elaborate parody, and an introductory chapter on Sir Willoughby's youth and his celebrated leg, which appears excessively precious until one realizes how surely it sets the artificial tone of the world in which Willoughby poses for the edification of his admirers, the formidable Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson (surely a lineal ancestress of Wilde's dowagers) and the languid and brainy Laetitia, that personification of the feminine mind made sterile by enslavement to convention. But once the reader has undergone the preliminary tests which Meredith expects of him, the course is clear and the action follows in a brisk series of dramatic episodes, each fulfilling a triple purpose of

enlightening us a shade more on Sir Willoughby's nature, of developing the resistance of the other characters to his insolent expectations, and of building the tension that rises steadily in this close circle of emotionally involved people like the heightening atmosphere before a thunderstorm. Apart from any of its other virtues, it is a fine work of suspense, paced on by witty conversation, economical in introspection and narrative, and, from the moment when Clara begins to detect the real and detestable Sir Willoughby, making the reader a fascinated observer of the shifts by which her feminine cunning surmounts the obstacles successively falling in her path. There are aspects of *The Egoist* which are madly improbable. Could Dr Middleton really betray his beloved daughter for a diet of old port? Was Willoughby's only way of living down his rejection by Clara really to marry a Laetitia who had learnt to despise him? Such an ending is indeed not consonant with realism but it is with poetic justice,

and that is what Meredith seeks. For *The Egoist* is after all a comedy, and, just as Meredith observes the unity of place and – within reasonable limits – the unity of time, so he ensures that the good – Clara and Vernon – shall get their reward, and the villain shall live to digest his suitably dusty answer.

All this gains in meaning when we remember that *The Egoist* is the extreme expression of Meredith's recurrent drama of the defeat of Egoism by the power of Comedy. At the mid nineteenth century, when Meredith began to write, Egoism was much in the air. In 1843 Max Stirner had published his treatise advocating Egoism as a revolutionary force, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, and it is possible that Meredith, with his interest in the German intellectual life of the time, was aware of it. 'Enlightened self-interest', even 'enlightened Egoism', was spoken of freely in England to justify the irresponsible relationship between industrialists and their employees, and it had been denounced by Carlyle, whom Meredith then respected. But these external circumstances are hardly sufficient to account for the way in which, from his first published work of prose, *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856), he consistently identified Egoism as the great enemy of truth, feeling and progress, and associated it with artficiality and with sentiment, which is the artificiality of feeling. This preoccupation sprang from the agonies of self-analysis by which Meredith fed his art.

The great sin of the Egoist is that he values nothing for its own sake. Willoughby does not sec in Clara a real girl whom he can love and cherish; he sees an ornament which will enhance his regard in the eyes of

the world. Vernon Whitford is retained at Patterne Hall not from any sense of friendship on Willoughby's part, but because a resident writer adds lustre to his employer's public image. Thus everything is prized or rejected for a false reason and a whole structure of artificial relationships is built up and sealed by sentiment. Love can thus be simulated at will and Sir Willoughby woos Clara and Laetitia within a few hours of each other, with almost identical and equally meaningless phrases of conventional passion.

It is this world of artificial relations that we enter with Clara Middleton, aware that the never-encountered Constantia Durham had already fled from it in panic. We breathe its curious dry air as, through the eyes of Clara, and later of Colonel de Craye and even eventually of Laetitia, we observe Willoughby's conceit and callousness reveal themselves in full monstrosity.

Then, almost exactly half-way through the book, Clara reaches the point where she can endure no longer Sir Willoughby's attentions and the obtuseness of her father. She runs away, and as she does a great storm beats over the countryside. The storm clears the air and the flight clarifies the situation like the great cleansing sheets of rain. Everyone is suddenly aware, that, even though Clara returns, the relationship between her and Willoughby has irrevocably changed, and from this point Clara (her very name, used in earlier Meredith books, is significant) looks on her situation with the clear eye of comedy, so that slowly her fear of Willoughby vanishes and all that remain are the Egoist's wild and comic manoeuvres to find a solution that will fit the realities of the situation and at the same time save his face among the snobs who surround him.

Comedy is, for Meredith, the dissolving element of Egoism. *The Egoist* is described as 'A Comedy in Narrative', and its Prelude invokes the Comic Spirit. Meredith was not the first English novelist to attempt a definition of the comic spirit in literature. Fielding had preceded him a century before when he wrote the Author's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*. Fielding went part of the road which Meredith followed. Like Meredith he denied any intention of perpetrating Burlesque, and maintained that it was not the Monstrous, but the Ridiculous that fell into his province.

> The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation.… Now, affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity and hypocrisy: for as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavour to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues…
>
> From the discovery of this affectation arises the Ridiculous – which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure; and that in a higher and stronger degree when the affectation arises from hypocrisy, than when from vanity: for to discover anyone to be the exact reverse of what he affects, is more surprising, and consequently more ridiculous, than to find him a little deficient in the quality he desires the reputation of. I might observe that our Ben Jonson, who of all men understood the Ridiculous the best, has chiefly used the hypocritical affectation.

In Fielding's definition, Joseph Surface, the most consummate hypocrite of English literature, would also be its most comic character. He is not, nor does he or any of Fielding's own characters achieve a comic complexity approaching that of Sir Willoughby Patterne. Parson Adams is funnier than Sir Willoughby, but that is not quite the same thing; one is meant to provoke our laughter, the other to stir our thought as well. The difference in approach can be seen when we consider the most famous and most characteristic passage from the *Essay on the Idea of Comedy*:

> If you believe that our civilisation is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied.… Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future on earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk – the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

It is the sign of Sir Willoughby's complexity in comparison with the comic characters of Fielding, that he is not guilty of a single affectation, of one glaring manifestation of vanity or hypocrisy, but that all the sins against common sense which Meredith details can be brought against him. Nor does the complexity lie merely in the many-sidedness of his folly. It lies also in the method of representation. Fielding's characters, and even those of Congreve and Wilde, who seem nearest to Meredith among English comic writers, are at best three-dimensional; we see in clear action the divergence between deed and pretension, the evidence of deception or self-deception. But in the case of Sir Willoughby we have not merely the external witness; we see the process at work within him and realize, in the depth of his thoughts, the extent to which natural impulse has been replaced by artificial calculation, in the same way as the living substance of some

perished animal is replaced by the fossil's hard stone. This probing complexity gives Meredith's comic art an analytic quality, which, before him, was almost unknown among the writers of comedy. Their approach tended to be the descriptive one of the old-fashioned natural historian; to observe, and represent, and wonder at man's folly. Meredith's is the diagnostic approach, seeking the pathology of vanity and its ultimate causes. Once we know those causes, he suggests, we may not suddenly cure a patient so chronic as Sir Willoughby, but we shall cease to become enslaved by his pretensions and, in ceasing to do so, we may – as Meredith suggests that Laetitia will do – begin his liberation.

But, though Meredith undoubtedly intended this lesson to be understood by those who read *The Egoist*, to end on the didactic note would be to leave a wrong impression of his actual achievement. It is as a consummate portrait of vanity and egoism that *The Egoist* succeeds; Sir Willoughby reformed would be Sir Willoughby destroyed, and in the wisdom of his art Meredith did no more than hint at the possibility. Here his obedience to the rigid laws of classical drama stood him in good stead; no novel benefits more from its observance of the unities. This is the story of the exposure and the defeat of Egoism; the transformation of Egoism would be another story, and Meredith was too much Sir Willoughby and too sensible an artist, to attempt it.

A Note on the Text

The text of *The Egoist* which I have used is Meredith's last, from the 1897 collected edition of his works. Meredith's revisions of many of his novels show great dissatisfaction with the earlier versions and, in such books as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, involve major structural changes which do not always seem justified. In the case of *The Egoist*, however, Meredith seems to have recognized this for the *jeu d'esprit* it was, and to have realized that any great meddling would have destroyed it. In consequence the changes he made were minor – a few brief cuts, a few substitutions of more felicitous words and phrases – and they represent no more than a last polishing of a work nearer perfection than anything else he wrote. A very few misprints which found their way into the 1897 edition have been corrected by reference to the First Edition, and on a very few occasions I have reverted, for the sake of clarity, to earlier and to my mind better punctuation.

A FACSIMILE OF THE TITLE PAGE OF THE FIRST EDITION

THE EGOIST

A COMEDY IN NARRATIVE

BY

GEORGE MEREDITH

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

C. KEGAN PAUL & CO., 1, PATERNOSTER SQUARE

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C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1, Paternoster Square
1879

PRELUDE

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A Chapter of which the Last Page only is of any Importance

COMEDY is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing. Credulity is not wooed through the impressionable senses; nor have we recourse to the small circular glow of the watchmaker's eye to raise in bright relief minutest grains of evidence for the routing of incredulity. The Comic Spirit conceives a definite situation for a number of characters, and rejects all accessories in the exclusive pursuit of them and their speech. For being a spirit, he hunts the spirit in men; vision and ardour constitute his merit; he has not a thought of persuading you to believe in him. Follow and you will see. But there is a question of the value of a run at his heels.

Now the world is possessed of a certain big book, the biggest book on earth; that might indeed be called the Book of Earth; whose title is the Book of Egoism, and it is a book full of the world's wisdom. So full of it, and of such dimensions is this book, in which the generations have written ever since they took to writing, that to be profitable to us the Book needs a powerful compression.

Who, says the notable humourist, in allusion to this Book, who can studiously travel through sheets of leaves, now capable of a stretch from the Lizard to the last few poor pulmonary snips and shreds of leagues dancing on their toes for cold, explorers tell us, and catching breath by good luck, like dogs at bones about a table, on the edge of the Pole? Inordinate unvaried length, sheer longinquity, staggers the heart, ages the very heart of us at a view. And how if we manage finally to print one of our pages on the crow-scalp of that solitary majestic outsider? We may get him into the Book; yet the knowledge we want will not be more present with us than it was when the chapters hung their end over the cliff you ken of at Dover, where sits our great lord and master contemplating the seas without upon the reflex of that within!

In other words, as I venture to translate him (humourists are difficult: it is a piece of their humour to puzzle our wits), the inward mirror, the embracing and condensing spirit, is required to give us those interminable milepost piles of matter (extending well-nigh to the very Pole) in essence, in chosen samples, digestibly. I conceive him to indicate that the realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and that prolongation of the vasty and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, steams the malady of sameness, our modern malady. We have the malady, whatever may be the cure or the cause. We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote; which was as if tired pedestrians should mount the engine-box of headlong trains; and Science introduced us to our o'er-hoary ancestry – them in the Oriental posture; whereupon we set up a primeval chattering to rival the Amazon forest nigh nightfall, cured, we fancied. And before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail. We had it fore and aft. We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science.

Art is the specific. We have little to learn of apes, and they may be left. The chief consideration for us is, what particular practice of Art in letters is the best for the perusal of the Book of our common wisdom; so that with clearer minds and livelier manners we may escape, as it were, into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns. Shall we read it by the watchmaker's eye in luminous rings eruptive of the infinitesimal, or pointed with examples and types under the broad Alpine survey of the spirit born of our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit? Wise men say the latter. They tell us that there is a constant tendency in the Book to accumulate excess of substance, and such repleteness, obscuring the glass it holds to mankind, renders us inexact in the recognition of our individual countenances; a perilous thing for civilization. And these wise men are strong in their opinion that we should encourage the Comic Spirit, who is after all our own offspring, to relieve the Book. Comedy, they say, is the true diversion, as it is likewise the key of the great Book, the music of the Book. They tell us how it condenses whole sections of the book

in a sentence, volumes in a character; so that a fair part of a book outstripping thousands of leagues when unrolled may be compassed in one comic sitting.

For verily, say they, we must read what we can of it, at least the page before us, if we would be men. One, with an index on the Book, cries out, in a style pardonable to his fervency: The remedy of your frightful affliction is here, through the stillatory of Comedy, and not in Science, nor yet in Speed, whose name is but another for voracity. Why, to be alive, to be quick in the soul, there should be diversity in the companion throbs of your pulses. Interrogate them. They lump along like the old loblegs of Dobbin the horse; or do their business like cudgels of carpet-thwackers expelling dust, or the cottage-clock pendulum teaching the infant hour over midnight simple arithmetic. This too in spite of Bacchus. And let them gallop; let them gallop with the God bestriding them, gallop to Hymen, gallop to Hades, they strike the same note. Monstrous monotonousness has enfolded us as with the arms of Amphitrite! We hear a shout of war for a diversion. – Comedy he pronounces to be our means of reading swiftly and

comprehensively. She it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook. If, he says, she watches over sentimentalism with a birch rod, she is not opposed to romance. You may love, and warmly love, so long as you are honest. Do not offend reason. A lover pretending too much by one foot's length of pretence, will have that foot caught in her trap. In Comedy is the singular scene of charity issuing of disdain under the stroke of honourable laughter: an Ariel released by Prospero's wand from the fetters of the damned witch Sycorax. And this laughter of reason refreshed is floriferous, like the magical great gale of the shifty Spring deciding for Summer. You hear it giving the delicate spirit his liberty. Listen, for comparison, to an unleavened society: a low as of the udderful cow past milking hour! O for a titled ecclesiastic to curse to excommunication that unholy thing! – So far an enthusiast perhaps; but he should have a hearing.

Concerning pathos, no ship can now set sail without pathos; and we are not totally deficient of pathos; which is, I do not accurately know what, if not the ballast, reducible to moisture by patent process, on board our modern vessel; for it can hardly be the cargo, and the general water supply has other uses; and ships well charged with it seem to sail the stiffest –there is a touch of pathos. The Egoist surely inspires pity. He who would desire to clothe himself at everybody's expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the actual person. Only he is not allowed to rush at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation.

You may as well know him out of hand, as a gentleman of our time and country, of wealth and station; a not flexile figure, do what we may with him; the humour of whom scarcely dimples the surfaces and is distinguishable but by very

penetrative, very wicked imps, whose fits of roaring below at some generally imperceptible stroke of his quality have first made the mild literary angels aware of something comic in him, when they were one and all about to describe the gentleman on the heading of the records baldly (where brevity is most complimentary) as a gentleman of family and property, an idol of a decorous island that admires the concrete. Imps have their freakish wickedness in them to kindle detective vision; malignly do they love to uncover ridiculousness in imposing figures. Wherever they catch sight of Egoism they pitch their camps, they circle and squat, and forthwith they trim their lanterns, confident of the ludicrous to come. So confident that their grip of an English gentleman, in whom

they have spied their game, never relaxes until he begins insensibly to frolic and antic, unknown to himself, and comes out in the native steam which is their scent of the chase. Instantly off they scour, Egoist and imps. They will, it is known of them, dog a great House for centuries, and be at the birth of all the new heirs in succession, diligently taking confirmatory notes, to join hands and chime their chorus in one of their merry rings round the tottering pillar of the House, when his turn arrives; as if they had (possibly they had) smelt of old date a doomed colossus of Egoism in that unborn, unconceived inheritor of the stuff of the family. They dare not be chuckling, while Egoism is valiant, while sober, while socially valuable, nationally serviceable. They wait.

Aforetime a grand old Egoism built the House. It would appear that ever finer essences of it are demanded to sustain the structure; but especially would it appear that a reversion to the gross original, beneath a mask and in a vein of fineness, is an earthquake at the foundations of the House. Better that it should not have consented to motion, and have held stubbornly to all ancestral ways, than have bred that anachronic spectre. The sight, however, is one to make our squatting imps in circle grow restless on their haunches, as they bend eyes instantly, ears at full cock, for the commencement of the comic drama of the suicide. If this line of verse be not yet in our literature,

Through very love of self himself he slew;

let it be admitted for his epitaph.

CHAPTER 1

A Minor Incident Showing an Hereditary Aptitude in the Use of the Knife

THERE was an ominously anxious watch of eyes visible and invisible over the infancy of Willoughby, fifth in descent from Simon Patterne, of Patterne Hall, premier of this family, a lawyer, a man of solid acquirements and stout ambition, who well understood the foundation-work of a House, and was endowed with the power of saying No to those first agents of destruction, besieging relatives. He said it with the resonant emphasis of death to younger sons. For if the oak is to become a stately tree, we must provide against the crowding of timber. Also the tree beset with parasites prospers not. A great House in its beginning lives, we may truly say, by the knife. Soil is easily got, and so are bricks, and a wife, and children come of wishing for them, but the vigorous use of the knife is a natural gift and points to growth. Pauper Patternes were numerous when the fifth head of the race was the hope of his county. A Patterne was in the Marines.

The country and the chief of this family were simultaneously informed of the existence of one Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne, of the corps of the famous hard fighters, through an act of heroism of the unpretending cool sort which kindles British blood, on the part of the modest young officer, in the

storming of some eastern riverain stronghold, somewhere about the coast of China. The officer's youth was assumed on the strength of his rank, perhaps likewise from the tale of his modesty: 'he had only done his duty'. Our Willoughby was then at college, emulous of the generous enthusiasm of his years, and strangely impressed by the report, and the printing of his name in the newspapers. He thought over it for several months, when, coming to his title and heritage, he sent Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne a cheque for a sum of money amounting to the gallant fellow's pay per annum, at the same time showing his acquaintance with the first, or chemical, principles of generosity, in the remark to friends at home, that 'blood is thicker than water'. The man is a Marine, but he is a Patterne. How any Patterne should have drifted into the Marines, is of the order of questions which are senselessly asked of the great dispensary. In the complimentary letter accompanying his cheque, the lieutenant was invited to present himself at the ancestral Hall, when convenient to

him, and he was assured that he had given his relative and friend a taste for a soldier's life. Young Sir Willoughby was fond of talking of his 'military namesake and distant cousin, young Patterne – the Marine'. It was funny; and not less laughable was the description of his namesake's deed of valour; with the rescued British sailor inebriate, and the hauling off to captivity of the three braves of the black dragon on a yellow ground, and the tying of them together back to back by their pigtails, and driving of them into our lines upon a newly devised dying-top style of march that inclined to the oblique, like the astonished six eyes of the celestial prisoners, for straight they could not go. The humour of gentlemen at home is always highly excited by such cool feats. We are a small island, but you see what we do. The ladies at the Hall, Sir Willoughby's mother, and his aunts Eleanor and Isabel, were more affected than he by the circumstance of their having a Patterne in the Marines. But how then! We English have ducal blood in business: we have, genealogists tell us,

royal blood in common trades. For all our pride we are a queer people; and you may be ordering butcher's meat of a Tudor, sitting on the cane-bottom chairs of a Plantagenet. By and by you may… but cherish your reverence. Young Willoughby made a kind of shock-head or football hero of his gallant distant cousin, and wondered occasionally that the fellow had been content to dispatch a letter of effusive thanks without availing himself of the invitation to partake of the hospitalities of Patterne.

He was one afternoon parading between showers on the stately garden terrace of the Hall, in company with his affianced, the beautiful and dashing Constantia Durham, followed by knots of ladies and gentlemen vowed to fresh air before dinner, while it was to be had. Chancing with his usual happy fortune (we call these things dealt to us out of the great hidden dispensary, chance) to glance up the avenue of limes, as he was in the act of turning on his heel at the end of the terrace, and, it should be added, discoursing with passion's privilege of the passion of love to Miss Durham, Sir Willoughby, who was anything but obtuse, experienced a presentiment upon espying a thick-set stumpy man crossing the gravel space from the avenue to the front steps of the Hall, decidedly *not* bearing the stamp of the gentleman 'on his hat, his coat, his feet,

or anything that was his', Willoughby subsequently observed to the ladies of his family in the Scriptural style of gentlemen who do bear the stamp. His brief sketch of the creature was repulsive. The visitor carried a bag, and his coat-collar was up, his hat was melancholy; he had the appearance of a bankrupt tradesman absconding; no gloves, no umbrella.

As to the incident we have to note, it was very slight. The card of Lieutenant Patterne was handed to Sir Willoughby, who laid it on the salver, saying to the footman, 'Not at home.'

He had been disappointed in the age, grossly deceived in the appearance of the man claiming to be his relative in this unseasonable fashion; and his acute instinct advised him swiftly of the absurdity of introducing to his friends a heavy unpresentable senior as the celebrated gallant Lieutenant of Marines, and the same as a member of his family! He had talked of the man too much, too enthusiastically, to be able to do so. A young subaltern, even if passably vulgar in figure, can be shuffled through by the aid of the heroical story humourously exaggerated in apology for his aspect. Nothing can be done with a mature and stumpy Marine of that rank. Considerateness dismisses him on the spot, without parley. It was performed by a gentleman supremely advanced at a very early age in the art of cutting.

Young Sir Willoughby spoke a word of the rejected visitor to Miss Durham, in response to her startled look: 'I shall drop him a cheque,' he said, for she seemed personally wounded, and had a face of crimson.

The young lady did not reply.

Dating from the humble departure of Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne up the limes-avenue under a gathering rain-cloud, the ring of imps in attendance on Sir Willoughby maintained their station with strict observation of his movements at all hours; and were comparisons in quest, the sympathetic eagerness of the eyes of caged monkeys for the hand about to feed them, would supply one. They perceived in him a fresh development and very subtle manifestation of the very old thing from which he had sprung.

CHAPTER 2

The Young Sir Willoughby

THESE little scoundrel imps, who have attained to some respectability as the dogs and pets of the Comic Spirit, had been curiously attentive three years earlier, long before the public announcement of his engagement to the beautiful Miss Durham, on the day of Sir Willoughby's majority, when Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson said her word of him. Mrs Mountstuart was a lady certain to say the remembered, if not the right, thing. Again and again was it confirmed on days of high celebration, days of birth or bridal, how sure she was to hit the mark that rang the bell; and away her word went over the county: and had she been an uncharitable woman she could have ruled the county with an iron rod of caricature, so sharp was her touch. A grain of malice would have sent county faces and characters awry into the currency. She was wealthy and kindly, and resembled our mother Nature in her reasonable antipathies to one or two things which none can defend, and her decided preference of persons that shone in the sun. Her word sprang out of her. She looked at you, and forth it came: and it stuck to you, as nothing laboured or literary could have adhered. Her saying of Laetitia Dale: 'Here she comes with a romantic tale on her eyelashes,' was a portrait of Laetitia. And that of Vernon Whitford: 'He is a Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar,' painted the sunken brilliancy of the lean long-walker and scholar at a stroke.

Of the young Sir Willoughby, her word was brief; and there was the merit of it on a day when he was hearing from sunrise to the setting of the moon salutes in his honour, songs of praise and Ciceronian eulogy. Rich, handsome, courteous, generous, lord of the Hall, the feast and the dance, he excited his guests of both sexes to a holiday of flattery. And, says Mrs Mountstuart, while grand phrases were mouthing round about him, '*You see he has a leg.*'

That you saw, of course. But after she had spoken you saw much more. Mrs Mountstuart said it just as others utter empty nothings, with never a hint of a stress. Her word was taken up, and very soon, from the extreme end of the long drawing-room, the circulation of something of Mrs Mountstuart's was distinctly perceptible. Lady Patterne sent a little Hebe down, skirting the dancers, for an accurate report of it; and even the inappreciative lips of a very young lady transmitting the word could not damp the impression of its weighty truthfulness. It was perfect! Adulation of the young Sir Willoughby's beauty and wit, and aristocratic bearing and mien, and of his moral virtues, was common; welcome if you like, as a form of

homage; but common, almost vulgar, beside Mrs Mountstuart's quiet little touch of nature. In seeming to say infinitely less than others, as Miss Isabel Patterne pointed out to Lady Busshe, Mrs Mountstuart comprised all that the others had said, by showing the needlessness of allusions to the saliently evident. She was the aristocrat reproving the provincial. 'He is everything you have had the goodness to remark, ladies and dear sirs, he talks charmingly, dances divinely, rides with the air of a commander-in-chief, has the most natural grand pose possible, without ceasing for a moment to be the young English gentleman he is. Alcibiades, fresh from a Louis IV perruquier,[1] could not surpass him: whatever you please; I could outdo you in sublime comparisons, were I minded to pelt him. Have you noticed that he has a leg?'

So might it be amplified. A simple-seeming word of this import is the triumph of the spiritual, and where it passes for coin of value, the society has reached a high refinement: Arcadian by the aesthetic route. Observation of Willoughby was not, as Miss Eleanor Patterne pointed out to Lady Culmer, drawn down to the leg, but directed to estimate him from the leg upward. That, however, is prosaic. Dwell a short space on Mrs Mountstuart's word; and whither, into what fair region, and with how decorously voluptuous a sensation, do not we fly, who have, through mournful veneration of the Martyr Charles, a coy attachment to the Court of his Merrie Son, where the leg was ribboned with love-knots and reigned. Oh! it was a naughty Court. Yet have we dreamed of it as the period when an English cavalier was grace incarnate; far from the boor now hustling us in another sphere; beautifully mannered, every gesture dulcet. And if the ladies were… we will hope they have been traduced. But if they were, if they were too tender, ah! gentlemen were gentlemen then – worth perishing for! There is this dream in the English country; and it must be an aspiration after some form of melodious gentlemanliness which is imagined to have inhabited the island at one time; as among our poets the dream of the period of a circle of chivalry here is encouraged for the pleasure of the imagination.

Mrs Mountstuart touched a thrilling chord. 'In spite of men's hateful modern costume, you see he has a leg.'

That is, the leg of the born cavalier is before you: and obscure it as you will, dress degenerately, there it is for ladies who have eyes. You *see* it: or, you see *he* has it. Miss Isabel and Miss Eleanor disputed the incidence of the emphasis, but surely, though a slight difference of meaning may be heard, either will do: many, with a good show of reason, throw the accent upon *leg*. And the ladies knew for a fact that Wiloughby's leg was exquisite; he had a cavalier court-suit in his wardrobe. Mrs Mountstuart signified that the leg was to be seen because it was a burning leg. There it is, and it *will* shine through. He has the leg of Rochester, Buckingham, Dorset, Suckling; the leg that smiles, that winks, is obsequious to you, yet perforce of beauty self-satisfied; that twinkles to a tender midway between imperiousness and seductiveness, audacity and discretion; between 'you shall worship me', and 'I am devoted to you'; is your lord, your slave, alternately and in one. It is a leg of ebb and flow and high-tide ripples. Such a leg, when it has done with pretending to retire, will walk straight into the hearts of women. Nothing so fatal to them.

Self-satisfied it must be. Humbleness does not win multitudes or the sex. It must be vain to have a sheen. Captivating melodies (to prove to you the unavoidableness of self-satisfaction when you know that you have hit perfection), listen to them closely, have an inner pipe of that conceit almost ludicrous when you detect the chirp.

And you need not be reminded that he has the leg without the naughtiness. You see eminent in him what we would fain have brought about in a nation that has lost its leg in gaining a possibly cleaner morality. And that is often contested; but there is no doubt of the loss of the leg.

Well, footmen and courtiers and Scottish Highlanders, and the corps de ballet, draymen too, have legs, and staring legs, shapely enough. But what are they? not the modulated instrument we mean – simply legs for leg-work, dumb as the brutes. Our cavalier's is the poetic leg, a portent, a valiance. He has it as Cicero had a tongue. It is a lute to scatter songs to his mistress; a rapier, is she obdurate. In sooth a leg with brains in it, soul.

And its shadows are an ambush, its lights a surprise. It blushes, it pales, can whisper, exclaim. It is a peep, a part revelation, just sufferable, of the Olympian god – Jove playing carpet-knight.

For the young Sir Willoughby's family and his thoughtful admirers, it is not too much to say that Mrs Mountstuart's little word fetched an epoch of our history to colour the evening of his arrival at man's estate. He was all that Merrie Charles's court should have been, subtracting not a sparkle from what it was. Under this light he danced, and you may consider the effect of it on his company.

He had received the domestic education of a prince. Little princes abound in a land of heaped riches. Where they have not to yield military service to an Imperial master, they are necessarily here and there dainty during youth, sometimes unmanageable, and as they are bound in no personal duty to the State, each is for himself, with full present, and what is more, luxurious, prospective leisure for the practice of

that allegiance. They are sometimes enervated by it: that must be in continental countries. Happily our climate and our brave blood precipitate the greater number upon the hunting-field, to do the public service of heading the chase of the fox, with benefit to their constitutions. Hence a manly as well as useful race of little princes, and Willoughby was as manly as any. He cultivated himself, he would not be outdone in popular accomplishments. Had the standard of the public taste been set in philosophy, and the national enthusiasm centred in philosophers, he would at least have worked at books. He did work at science, and had a laboratory. His admirable passion to excel, however, was chiefly directed in his youth upon sport; and so great was the passion in him, that it was commonly the presence of rivals which led him to the declaration of love.

He knew himself, nevertheless, to be the most constant of men in his attachment to the sex. He had never discouraged Laetitia Dale's devotion to him, and even when he followed in the sweeping tide of the beautiful Constantia Durham (whom Mrs Mountstuart called 'The Racing Cutter'), he thought of Laetitia, and looked at her. She was a shy violet.

Willoughby's comportment while the showers of adulation drenched him might be likened to the composure of Indian Gods undergoing worship, but unlike them he reposed upon no seat of amplitude to preserve him from a betrayal of intoxication; he had to continue tripping, dancing, exactly balancing himself, head to right, head to left, addressing his idolaters in phrases of perfect choiceness. This is only to say that it is easier to be a wooden idol than one in the flesh; yet Willoughby was equal to his task. The little prince's education teaches him that he is other than you, and by virtue of the instruction he receives, and also something, we know not what, within, he is enabled to maintain his posture where you would be tottering. Urchins upon whose curly pates grave seniors lay their hands with conventional encomium and speculation, look older than they are immediately, and Willoughby looked older than his years, not for want of freshness, but because he felt that he had to stand eminently and correctly poised.

Hearing of Mrs Mountstuart's word on him, he smiled and said, 'It is at her service.'

The speech was communicated to her, and she proposed to attach a dedicatory strip of silk. And then they came together, and there was wit and repartee suitable to the electrical atmosphere of the dancing-room, on the march to a magical hall of supper. Willoughby conducted Mrs Mountstuart to the supper-table.

'Were I,' said she, 'twenty years younger, I think I would marry you, to cure my infatuation.'

'Then let me tell you in advance, madam,' said he, 'that I will do everything to obtain a new lease of it, except divorce you.'

They were infinitely wittier, but so much was heard and may be reported.

'It makes the business of choosing a wife for him superhumanly difficult!' Mrs Mountstuart observed, after listening to the praises she had set going again when the ladies were weeded of us, in Lady Patterne's Indian room, and could converse unhampered upon their own ethereal themes.

'Willoughby will choose a wife for himself,' said his mother.

CHAPTER 3

Constantia Durham

THE great question for the county was debated in many households, daughter-thronged and daughterless, long subsequent to the memorable day of Willoughby's coming of age. Lady Busshe was for Constantia Durham. She laughed at Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's notion of Laetitia Dale. She was a little older than Mrs Mountstuart, and had known Willoughby's father, whose marriage into the wealthiest branch of the Whitford family had been strictly sagacious. 'Patternes marry money; they are not romantic people,' she said. Miss Durham had money, and she had health and beauty: three mighty qualifications for a Patterne bride. Her father, Sir John Durham, was a large landowner in the western division of the county; a pompous gentleman, the picture of a father-in-law for Willoughby. The father of Miss Dale was a battered army

surgeon from India, tenant of one of Sir Willoughby's cottages bordering Patterne Park. His girl was portionless and a poetess. Her writing of the song in celebration of the young baronet's birthday was thought a clever venture, bold as only your timid creatures can be bold. She let the cat out of her bag of

verse before the multitude; she almost proposed to her hero in her rhymes. She was pretty; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark-blue, and her soul was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby. And he looked, he certainly looked, though he did not dance with her once that night, and danced repeatedly with Miss Durham. He gave Laetitia to Vernon Whitford for the final dance of the night, and he may have looked at her so much in pity of an elegant girl allied to such a partner. The 'Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar' had entirely forgotten his musical gifts inmotion. He crossed himself and crossed his bewildered lady, and crossed everybody in the figure, extorting shouts of cordial laughter from his cousin Willoughby. Be it said that the hour was four in the morning, when dancers must laugh at somebody, if only to refresh their feet, and the wit of the hour administers to the wildest laughter. Vernon was likened to Theseus in the maze, entirely dependent upon his Ariadne; to a fly released from a jam-pot; to a 'salvage', or green, man caught in a web of nymphs and made to go the paces. Willoughby was inexhaustible in the happy similes he poured out to Miss Durham across the lines of Sir Roger de Coverley, and they were not forgotten, they procured him a reputation as a convivial sparkler. Rumour went the round that he intended to give Laetitia to Vernon for good, when he could decide to take Miss Durham to himself; his generosity was famous; but that decision, though the rope was in the form of a knot, seemed reluctant for the conclusive close haul; it preferred the state of slackness; and if he courted Laetitia on behalf of his cousin, his cousinly love must have been greater than his passion, one had to suppose. He was generous enough for it, or for marrying the portionless girl himself.

There was a story of a brilliant young widow of our aristocracy who had very nearly snared him. Why should he object to marry into our aristocracy? Mrs Mountstuart asked him, and he replied that the girls of that class have no money, and he doubted the quality of their blood. He had his eyes awake. His duty to his House was a foremost thought with him, and for such a reason he may have been more anxious to give the slim and not robust Laetitia to Vernon than accede to his personal inclination. The mention of the widow singularly offended him, notwithstanding the high rank of the lady named. 'A widow?' he said. 'I?' He spoke to a widow; an oldish one truly; but his wrath at the suggestion of his union with a widow led him to be for the moment oblivious of the minor shades of good taste. He desired Mrs Mountstuart to contradict the story in positive terms. He repeated his desire;

he was urgent to have it contradicted, and said again, 'A widow!' straightening his whole figure to the erectness of the letter I. She was a widow unmarried a second time, and it has been known of the stedfast women who retain the name of their first husband, or do not hamper his title with a little new squire at their skirts, that they can partially approve the objections indicated by Sir Willoughby. They are thinking of themselves when they do so, and they will rarely say, 'I might have married'; rarely within them will they avow that, with their permission, it might have been. They can catch an idea of a gentleman's view of the widow's cap. But a niceness that could feel sharply wounded by the simple rumour of his alliance with the young relict of an earl was mystifying. Sir Willoughby unbent. His military letter I took a careless glance at itself lounging idly and proudly at ease in the glass of his mind, decked with a wanton wreath, as he dropped a hint, generously vague, just to show the origin of the rumour, and the excellent basis it had for not being credited. He was chidden. Mrs Mountstuart read him a lecture. She was however able to contradict the tale of the young countess. 'There is no fear of his marrying her, my dears.'

Meanwhile there was a fear that he would lose his chance of marrying the beautiful Miss Durham.

The dilemmas of little princes are often grave. They should be dwelt on now and then for an example to poor struggling commoners, of the slings and arrows assailing fortune's most favoured men, that we may preach contentment to the wretch who cannot muster wherewithal to marry a wife, or has done it and trots the streets, pack-laden, to maintain the dame and troops of children painfully reared to fill subordinate stations. According to our reading, a moral is always welcome in a moral country, and especially so when silly envy is to be chastised by it, the restless craving for change rebuked. Young Sir Willoughby, then, stood in this dilemma: – a lady was at either hand of him; the only two that had ever, apart from metropolitan conquests, not to be recited, touched his emotions.

Susceptible to beauty, he had never seen so beautiful a girl as Constantia Durham. Equally susceptible to admiration of himself, he considered Laetitia Dale a paragon of cleverness. He stood between the queenly rose and the modest violet. One he bowed to; the other bowed to him. He could not have both; it is the law governing princes and pedestrians alike. But which could he forfeit? His growing acquaintance with the world taught him to put an increasing price on the sentiments of Miss Dale. Still Constantia's beauty was of a kind to send away beholders aching. She had the glory of the racing cutter full sail on a winning breeze; and she did not court to win him, she flew. In his more reflective hour the attractiveness of that lady which held the mirror to his features was paramount. But he had passionate snatches when the magnetism of the flyer drew him in her wake. Further to add to the complexity, he loved his liberty; he was princelier free; he had more subjects, more slaves; he ruled arrogantly in the world of women; he was more himself. His

metropolitan experiences did not answer to his liking the particular question, Do we bind the woman down to us idolatrously by making a wife of her?

In the midst of his deliberations, a report of the hot pursuit of Miss Durham, casually mentioned to him by Lady Busshe, drew an immediate proposal from Sir Willoughby. She accepted him, and they were engaged. She had been nibbled at, all but eaten up, while he hung dubitative; and though that was the cause of his winning her, it offended his niceness. She had not come to him out of cloistral purity, out of perfect radiancy. Spiritually, likewise, was he a little prince, a despotic prince. He wished for her to have come to him out of an eggshell, somewhat more astonished at things than a chicken, but as completely enclosed before he tapped the shell, and seeing him with her sex's eyes first of all men. She talked frankly of her cousins and friends, young males. She could have replied to his bitter wish: 'Had you asked me on the night of your twenty-first birthday, Willoughby!' Since then she had been

in the dust of the world, and he conceived his peculiar antipathy, destined to be so fatal to him, from the earlier hours of his engagement. He was quaintly incapable of a jealousy of individuals. A young Captain Oxford had been foremost in the swarm pursuing Constantia. Willoughby thought as little of Captain Oxford as he did of Vernon Whitford. His enemy was the world, the mass, which confounds us in a lump, which has breathed on her whom we have selected, whom we cannot, can never, rub quite clear of her contact with the abominated crowd. The pleasure of the world is to bowl down our soldierly letter I; to encroach on our identity, soil our niceness. To begin to think is the beginning of disgust of the world.

As soon the engagement was published all the county said that there had not been a chance for Laetitia, and Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson humbly remarked, in an attitude of penitence, 'I'm not a witch.' Lady Busshe could claim to be one; she had foretold the event. Laetitia was of the same opinion as the county. She had looked up, but not hopefully. She had only looked up to the brightest, and, as he was the highest, how could she have hoped? She was the solitary companion of a sick father, whose inveterate prognostic of her, that she would live to rule at Patterne Hall, tortured the poor girl in proportion as he seemed to derive comfort from it. The noise of the engagement merely silenced him; recluse invalids cling obstinately to their ideas. He had observed Sir Willoughby in the society of his daughter, when the young baronet revived to a sprightly boyishness immediately. Indeed, as big boy and little girl, they had played together of old. Willoughby had been a handsome, fair boy. The portrait of him at the Hall, in a hat, leaning on his pony, with crossed legs, and long flaxen curls over his shoulders, was the image of her soul's most present angel; and, as a man, he had – she did not suppose intentionally – subjected her nature to bow to him; so submissive was she, that it was fuller happiness for her to think him right in all his actions than to imagine the circumstances different. This may

appear to resemble the ecstasy of the devotee of Juggernaut.[2] It is a form of the passion inspired by little princes, and we need not marvel that a conservative sex should assist to keep them in their lofty places. What were there otherwise to look up to? We should have no dazzling beacon-lights if they were levelled and treated as clod earth; and it is worth while for here and there a woman to be burned, so long as women's general adoration of an ideal young man shall be preserved. Purity is our demand of them. They may justly cry for attraction. They cannot have it brighter than in the universal bearing of the eyes of their sisters upon a little prince, one who has the ostensible virtues in his pay, and can practise them without injuring himself to make himself unsightly. Let the races of men be by-and-by astonished at their Gods, if they please. Meantime they had better continue to worship.

Laetitia did continue. She saw Miss Durham at Patterne on several occasions. She admired the pair. She had a wish to witness the bridal ceremony. She was looking forward to the day with that mixture of eagerness and withholding which we have as we draw nigh the disenchanting termination of an enchanting romance, when Sir Willoughby met her on a Sunday morning, as she crossed his park solitarily to church. They were within ten days of the appointed ceremony. He should have been away at Miss Durham's end of the county. He had, Laetitia knew, ridden over to her the day before; but there he was; and very unwontedly, quite surprisingly, he presented his arm to conduct Laetitia to the church-door, and talked and laughed in a way that reminded her of a hunting gentleman she had seen once rising to his feet, staggering from an ugly fall across hedge and fence into one of the lanes of her short winter walks. 'All's well, all sound, never better, only a scratch!' the gentleman had said, as he reeled and pressed a bleeding head. Sir Willoughby chattered of his felicity in meeting her. 'I am really wonderfully lucky,' he said, and he said that and other things over and over, incessantly talking, and telling an anecdote of county occurrences, and laughing

at it with a mouth that would not widen. He went on talking in the church porch, and murmuring softly some steps up the aisle, passing the pews of Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson and Lady Busshe. Of course he was entertaining, but what a strangeness it was to Laetitia! His face would have been half under an antique

bonnet. It came very close to hers, and the scrutiny he bent on her was most solicitous.

After the service, he avoided the great ladies by sauntering up to within a yard or two of where she sat; he craved her hand on his arm to lead her forth by the park entrance to the church, all the while bending to her, discoursing rapidly, appearing radiantly interested in her quiet replies, with fits of intentness that stared itself out into dim abstraction. She hazarded the briefest replies for fear of not having understood him.

One question she asked: 'Miss Durham is well, I trust?'

And he answered 'Durham?' and said, 'There is no Miss Durham to my knowledge.'

The impression he left with her was, that he might yesterday during his ride have had an accident and fallen on his head.

She would have asked that, if she had not known him for so thorough an Englishman, in his dislike to have it thought that accidents could hurt even when they happened to him.

He called the next day to claim her for a walk. He assured her she had promised it, and he appealed to her father, who could not testify to a promise he had not heard, but begged her to leave him to have her walk. So once more she was in the park with Sir Willoughby, listening to his raptures over old days. A word of assent from her sufficed him. 'I am now myself,' was one of the remarks he repeated this day. She dilated on the beauty of the park and the Hall to gratify him.

He did not speak of Miss Durham, and Laetitia became afraid to mention her name.

At their parting, Willoughby promised Laetitia that he would call on the morrow. He did not come; and she could well excuse him, after her hearing of the tale.

It was a lamentable tale. He had ridden to Sir John Durham's mansion, a distance of thirty miles, to hear, on his arrival, that Constantia had quitted her father's house two days previously on a visit to an aunt in London, and had just sent word that she was the wife of Captain Oxford, hussar, and messmate of one of her brothers. A letter from the bride awaited Willoughby at the Hall. He had ridden back at night, not caring how he used his horse in order to get swiftly home, so forgetful of himself was he under the terrible blow. That was the night of Saturday. On the day following, being Sunday, he met Laetitia in his park, led her to church, led her out of it, and the day after that, previous to his disappearance for some weeks, was walking with her in full view of the carriages along the road.

He had, indeed, you see, been very fortunately, if not considerately, liberated by Miss Durham. He, as a man of honour, could not have taken the initiative, but the frenzy of a jealous girl might urge her to such a course; and how little he suffered from it had been shown to the world. Miss Durham, the story went, was his mother's choice for him against his heart's inclinations; which had finally subdued Lady Patterne. Consequently, there was no longer an obstacle between Sir Willoughby and Miss Dale. It was a pleasant and romantic story, and it put most people in good humour with the county's favourite, as his choice of a portionless girl of no position would not have done without the shock of astonishment at the conduct of Miss Durham, and the desire to feel that so prevailing a gentleman was not in any degree pitiable. Constantia was called 'that mad thing'. Laetitia broke forth in novel and abundant merits; and one of the chief points of requisition in relation to Patterne – a Lady Willoughby who would entertain well and animate the deadness of the Hall, became a certainty when her gentleness and liveliness and exceeding cleverness were considered. She was often a visitor at the Hall by Lady Patterne's express invitation, and sometimes on these occasions Willoughby was there too,

superintending the filling up of his laboratory, though he was not at home to the county; it was not expected that he should be yet. He had taken heartily to the pursuit of science, and spoke of little else. Science, he said, was in our days the sole object worth a devoted pursuit. But the sweeping remark could hardly apply to Laetitia, of whom he was the courteous, quiet wooer you behold when a man has broken loose from an unhappy tangle to return to the lady of his first and strongest affections.

Some months of homely courtship ensued, and then, the decent interval prescribed by the situation having elapsed, Sir Willoughby Patterne left his native land on a tour of the globe.

CHAPTER 4

Laetitia Dale

THAT was another surprise to the county.

Let us not inquire into the feelings of patiently starving women; they must obtain some sustenance of their own, since, as you perceive, they live; evidently they are not in need of a great amount of nourishment; and we may set them down for creatures with a rush-light of animal fire to warm them. They cannot have much vitality who are so little exclamatory. A corresponding sentiment of patient compassion, akin to scorn, is provoked by persons having the opportunity for pathos, and declining to use it. The public bosom was open to Laetitia for several weeks, and had she run to it to bewail herself she would have been cherished in thankfulness for a country drama. There would have been a party against her, cold people, critical of her pretensions to rise from an unrecognized sphere to be mistress of Patterne Hall, but there would also have been a party against Sir Willoughby, composed of the two or three revolutionists, tired of the yoke, which are to be found in England when there is a stir; a larger number of born sympathetics, ever ready to yield the tear for the tear; and here and there a Samaritan soul prompt to succour poor humanity in distress. The opportunity passed undramatized. Laetitia presented herself at church with a face mildly devout, according to her custom, and she accepted invitations to the Hall, she assisted at the reading of Willoughby's letters to his family, and fed on dry husks of him wherein her name was not mentioned; never one note of the summoning call for pathos did this young lady blow.

So, very soon the public bosom closed. She had, under the fresh interpretation of affairs, too small a spirit to be Lady Willoughby of Patterne; she could not have entertained becomingly; he must have seen that the girl was not the match for him in station, and off he went to conquer the remainder of a troublesome first attachment, no longer extremely disturbing, to judge from the tenour of his letters; really incomparable letters! Lady Busshe and Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson enjoyed a perusal of them. Sir Willoughby appeared as a splendid young representative island lord in these letters to his family, despatched from the principal cities of the United States of America. He would give them a sketch of 'our democratic cousins', he said. Such cousins! They might all have been in the Marines. He carried his English standard over that continent, and by simply jotting down facts, he left an idea of the results of the measurement to his family and friends at home. He was an adept in the irony of incongruously grouping. The nature of the equality under the Stars and Stripes was presented in this manner. Equality! Reflections came occasionally: 'These cousins of ours are highly amusing. I am among the descendants of the Roundheads. Now and then an allusion to old domestic differences, in perfect good temper. We go on in our way; they theirs,

in the apparent belief that Republicanism operates remarkable changes in human nature. Vernon tries hard to think it does. The upper ten of our cousins are the Infernal of Paris. The rest of them is Radical England, as far as I am acquainted with that section of my country.' – Where we compared, they were absurd; where we contrasted, they were monstrous. The contrast of Vernon's letters with Willoughby's was just as extreme. You could hardly have taken them for relatives travelling together, or Vernon Whitford for a born and bred Englishman. The same scenes furnished by these two pens might have been sketched in different hemispheres. Vernon had no irony. He had nothing of Willoughby's epistolary creative power, which, causing his family and friends to exclaim: 'How like him that is!' conjured them across the broad Atlantic to behold and clap hands at his lordliness.

They saw him distinctly, as with the naked eye; a word, a turn of the pen, or a word unsaid, offered the picture of him in America, Japan, China, Australia, nay, the continent of Europe, holding an English review of his Maker's grotesques. Vernon seemed a sheepish fellow, without stature abroad, glad of a compliment, grateful for a dinner, endeavouring sadly to digest all he saw and heard. But one was a Patterne; the other a Whitford. One had genius; the other pottered after him with the title of student. One was the English gentleman wherever he went; the other was a new kind of thing, nondescript, produced in England of late, and not likely to come to much good himself, or do much good to the country.

Vernon's dancing in America was capitally described by Willoughby. 'Adieu to our cousins!' the latter wrote on his voyage to Japan. 'I may possibly have had some vogue in their ball-rooms, and in showing them an English seat on horseback: I must resign myself if I have not been popular among them. I could not sing their national song – if a congery of States be a nation – and I must confess I listened with frigid politeness to their singing of it. A great people, no doubt. Adieu to them. I have had to tear old Vernon away. He had serious thoughts of settling, means to correspond with some of them.' On the whole, forgetting two or more 'traits of insolence' on the part of his hosts, which he cited, Willoughby escaped pretty comfortably. The president had been, consciously or not, uncivil, but one knew his origin. Upon these interjections, placable flicks of the lionly tail addressed to Britannia the Ruler, who expected him in some mildish way to lash terga cauda[3] in retiring, Sir Willoughby Patterne passed from a land of alien manners; and ever after he spoke of America respectfully and pensively, with a tail tucked in, as it were. His travels were profitable to himself. The fact is, that there are cousins who come to greatness and must be pacified, or they will prove annoying. Heaven forefend a collision between cousins!

Willoughby returned to his England after an absence of three years. On a fair April morning, the last of the month, he drove along his park palings, and, by the luck of things, Laetitia was the first of his friends whom he met. She was crossing from field to field with a band of school-children, gathering wild flowers for the morrow May-day. He sprang to the ground and seized her hand. 'Laetitia Dale!' he said. He panted. 'Your name is sweet English music! And you are well?' The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go, saying: 'I could not have prayed for a lovelier home-scene to welcome me than you and these children flower-gathering. I don't believe in chance. It was decreed that we should meet. Do not you think so?'

Laetitia breathed faintly of her gladness.

He begged her to distribute a gold coin among the little ones; asked for the names of some of them, and repeated: 'Mary, Susan, Charlotte – only the Christian names, pray! Well, my dears, you will bring your garlands to the Hall to-morrow morning; and mind, early! no slugabeds tomorrow; I suppose I am browned, Laetitia?' He smiled in apology for the foreign sun, and murmured, with rapture: 'The green of this English country is unsurpassed. It is wonderful. Leave England and be baked, if you would appreciate it. You can't, unless you taste exile as I have done – for how many years? How many?'

'Three,' said Laetitia.

'Thirty!' said he. 'It seems to me that length. At least, I am immensely older. But looking at you, I could think it less than three. You have not changed. You are absolutely unchanged. I am bound to hope so. I shall see you soon. I have much to talk of, much to tell you. I shall hasten to call on your father. I have specially to speak with him. I – what happiness this is, Laetitia! But I must not forget I have a mother. Adieu; for some hours – not for many!'

He pressed her hand again. He was gone.

She dismissed the children to their homes. Plucking primroses was hard labour now – a dusty business. She could have wished that her planet had not descended to earth, his presence agitated her so; but his enthusiastic patriotism was like a shower that, in the Spring season of the year, sweeps against the hard-binding East and melts the air and brings out new colours, makes life flow; and her thoughts recurred in wonderment to the behaviour of Constantia Durham. That was Lactitia's manner of taking up her weakness once more. She could almost have reviled the woman who had given this beneficent magician, this pathetic exile, of the aristocratic sunburned visage and deeply scrutinizing eyes, cause for grief. How deeply his eyes could read! The starveling of patience awoke to the idea of a feast. The sense of hunger came with it, and hope came, and patience fled. She would have rejected hope to keep patience nigh her; but surely it can not always be Winter! said her reasoning blood, and we must excuse her as best we can if she was assured by her restored warmth that Willoughby came in the order of the revolving seasons, marking a long Winter past. He had specially to speak with her father, he had said. What could that mean? What, but – She dared not phrase it or view it.

At their next meeting she was 'Miss Dale'.

A week later he was closeted with her father.

Mr Dale, in the evening of that pregnant day, eulogized Sir Willoughby as a landlord. A new lease of the cottage was to be granted him on the old terms, he said. Except that Sir Willoughby had congratulated him in the possession of an excellent daughter, their interview was one of landlord and tenant, it appeared; and Laetitia said, 'So we shall not have to leave the cottage?' in a tone of satisfaction, while she quietly gave a wrench to the neck of the young hope in her breast. At night her diary received the line: 'This day I was a fool. To-morrow?'

To-morrow and many days afterwards there were dashes instead of words.

Patience travelled back to her sullenly. As we must have some kind of food, and she had nothing else, she took to that and found it dryer than of yore. It is a composing but a lean dietary. The dead are patient, and we get a certain likeness to them in feeding on it unintermittingly overlong. Her hollowed cheeks with the fallen leaf in them pleaded against herself to justify her idol for not looking down on one like her. She saw him when he was at the Hall. He did not notice any change. He was exceedingly gentle and courteous. More than once she discovered his eyes dwelling on her, and then he looked hurriedly at his mother, and Laetitia had to shut her mind from thinking, lest thinking should be a sin and hope a guilty spectre. But had his mother objected to her? She could not avoid asking herself. His tour of the globe had been undertaken at his mother's desire; she was an ambitious lady, in failing health; and she wished to have him living with her at Patterne, yet seemed to agree that he did wisely to reside in London.

One day Sir Willoughby, in the quiet manner which was his humour, informed her that he had become a country gentleman; he had abandoned London, he loathed it as the burial-place of the individual man. He

intended to sit down on his estates and have his cousin Vernon Whitford to assist him in managing them, he said; and very amusing was his description of his cousin's shifts to live by literature, and add enough to a beggarly income to get his usual two months of the year in the Alps. Previous to his great tour, Willoughby had spoken of Vernon's judgement with derision; nor was it entirely unknown that Vernon had offended his family pride by some extravagant act. But after their return he acknowledged Vernon's talents, and seemed unable to do without him.

The new arrangement gave Laetitia a companion for her walks. Pedestrianism was a sour business to Willoughby, whose exclamation of the word indicated a willingness for any amount of exercise on horseback; but she had no horse, and so, while he hunted, Laetitia and Vernon walked, and the neighbourhood speculated on the circumstances, until the ladies Eleanor and Isabel Patterne engaged her more frequently for carriage exercise, and Sir Willoughby was observed riding beside them.

A real and sunny pleasure befell Laetitia in the establishment of young Crossjay Patterne under her roof; the son of the lieutenant, now captain, of Marines; a boy of twelve with the sprights of twelve boys in him, for whose board and lodgement Vernon provided by arrangement with her father. Vernon was one of your men that have no occupation for their money, no bills to pay for repair of their property, and are insane to spend. He had heard of Captain Patterne's large family, and proposed to have his eldest boy at the Hall, to teach him; but Willoughby declined to house the son of such a father, predicting that the boy's hair would be red, his skin eruptive, and his practices detestable. So Vernon, having obtained Mr Dale's consent to accommodate this youth, stalked off to Devonport, and brought back a rosy-cheeked, round-bodied rogue of a boy, who fell upon meats and puddings, and defeated them, with a captivating simplicity in his confession that he had never had enough to eat in his life. He had gone through a training for a plentiful table. At first, after a number of helps, young Crossjay would sit and sigh heavily, in contemplation of the unfinished dish. Subsequently, he told his host and hostess that he had two sisters above his own age, and three brothers and two sisters younger than he: 'All hungry!' said the boy.

His pathos was most comical. It was a good month before he could see pudding taken away from table without a sigh of regret that he could not finish it as deputy for the Devonport household. The pranks of the little fellow, and his revel in a country life, and muddy wildness in it, amused Laetitia from morning to night. She, when she had caught him, taught him in the morning; Vernon, favoured by the chase, in the afternoon. Young Crossjay would have enlivened any household. He was not only indolent, he was opposed to the acquisition of knowledge through the medium of books, and would say: 'But I don't want to!' in a tone to make a logician thoughtful. Nature was very strong in him. He had, on each return of the hour for instruction, to be plucked out of the earth, rank of the soil, like a root, for the exercise of his big round headpiece on those tyrannous puzzles. But the habits of birds, and the place

for their eggs, and the management of rabbits, and the tickling of fish, and poaching joys with combative boys of the district, and how to wheedle a cook for a luncheon for a whole day in the rain, he soon knew of his great nature. His passion for our naval service was a means of screwing his attention to lessons after he had begun to understand that the desert had to be traversed to attain midshipman's rank. He boasted ardently of his fighting father, and, chancing to be near the Hall as he was talking to Vernon and Laetitia of his father, he propounded a question close to his heart, and he put it in these words, following: 'My father's the one to lead an army!' when he paused. 'I say, Mr Whitford, Sir Willoughby's kind to me, and gives me crown-pieces, why wouldn't he see my father, and my father came here ten miles in the rain

to see him, and had to walk ten miles back, and sleep at an inn?'

The only answer to be given was, that Sir Willoughby could not have been at home. 'Oh! my father saw him, and Sir Willoughby said he was no at home,' the boy replied, producing an odd ring in the ear by his repetition of 'not at home' in the same voice as the apology, plainly innocent of malice. Vernon told Laetitia, however, that the boy never asked an explanation of Sir Willoughby.

Unlike the horse of the adage, it was easier to compel young Crossjay to drink of the waters of instruction than to get him to the brink. His heart was not so antagonistic as his nature, and by degrees, owing to a proper mixture of discipline and cajolery, he imbibed. He was whistling at the cook's windows after a day of wicked truancy, on an April night, and reported adventures over the supper supplied to him. Laetitia entered the kitchen with a reproving forefinger. He jumped to kiss her, and went on chattering of a place fifteen miles distant, where he had seen Sir Willoughby riding with a young lady. The impossibility that the boy should have got so far on foot made Laetitia doubtful of his veracity, until she heard that a gentleman had taken him up on the road in a gig, and had driven him to a farm to show him strings of birds' eggs and stuffed birds of every English kind, kingfishers, yaffles, black woodpeckers, goat-sucker owls, more mouth than head, with dusty, dark-spotted wings, like moths; all very circumstantial. Still, in spite of his tea at the farm, and ride back by rail at the gentleman's expense, the tale seemed fictitious to Laetitia until Crossjay

related how that he had stood to salute on the road to the railway, and taken off his cap to Sir Willoughby, and Sir Willoughby had passed him, not noticing him, though the young lady did, and looked back and nodded. The hue of truth was in that picture.

Strange eclipse, when the hue of truth comes shadowing over our bright ideal planet. It will not seem the planet's fault, but truth's. Reality is the offender; delusion our treasure that we are robbed of. Then begins with us the term of wilful delusion, and its necessary accompaniment of the disgust of reality; exhausting the heart much more than patient endurance of starvation.

Hints were dropping about the neighbourhood; the hedgeways twittered, the tree-tops cawed. Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson was loud on the subject: 'Patterne is to have a mistress at last, you say? But there never was a doubt of his marrying – he must marry; and, so long as he does not marry a foreign woman, we have no cause to complain. He met her at Cherriton. Both were struck at the same moment. Her father is, I hear, some sort of learned man; money; no land. No house either, I believe. People who spend half their time on the Continent. They are now for a year at Upton Park. The very girl to settle down and entertain when she does think of settling. Eighteen, perfect manners; you need not ask if a beauty. Sir Willoughby will have his dues. We must teach her to make amends to him – but don't listen to Lady Busshe! He was too young at twenty-three or twenty-four. No young man is ever jilted; he is allowed to escape. A young man married is a fire-eater bound over to keep the peace; if he keeps it he worries it. At thirty-one or thirty-two he is ripe for his command, because he knows how to bend. And Sir Willoughby is a splendid creature, only wanting a wife to complete him. For a man like that to go on running about would never do. Soberly – no! It would soon be getting ridiculous. He has been no worse than other men, probably better – infinitely more excusable; but now we have him, and it was time we should. I shall see her and study her, sharply, you may be sure; though I fancy I can rely on his judgement.'

In confirmation of the swelling buzz, the Rev. Dr Middleton and his daughter paid a flying visit to the Hall, where they were seen only by the members of the Patterne family. Young Crossjay had a short conversation with Miss Middleton, and ran to the cottage full of her – she loved the navy and had a merry face. She had a smile of very pleasant humour according to Vernon. The young lady was outlined to Laetitia as tall, elegant, lively; and painted as carrying youth like a flag. With her smile of 'very pleasant humour', she could not but be winning.

Vernon spoke more of her father, a scholar of high repute; happily, a scholar of an independent fortune. His maturer recollection of Miss Middleton grew poetic, or he described her in an image to suit a poetic end: 'She gives you an idea of the Mountain Echo. Doctor Middleton has one of the grandest heads in England.'

'What is her Christian name?' said Laetitia.

He thought her Christian name was Clara.

Laetitia went to bed and walked through the day conceiving the Mountain Echo the swift, wild spirit, Clara by name, sent fleeting on a far half circle by the voice it is roused to sub-serve; sweeter than beautiful, high above drawing-room beauties as the colours of the sky; and if, at the same time, elegant and of loveable smiling, could a man resist her? To inspire the title of Mountain Echo in any mind, a young lady must be singularly spiritualized. Her father doated on her, Vernon said. Who would not? It seemed an additional cruelty that the grace of a poetical attractiveness should be round her, for this was robbing Laetitia of some of her own little fortune, mystical though that might be. But a man like Sir Willoughby had claims on poetry, possessing as he did every manly grace; and to think that Miss Middleton had won him by virtue of something native to her likewise, though mystically, touched Laetitia with a faint sense of relationship to the chosen girl. 'What is in me, he sees on her.' It decked her pride to think so, as a wreath on the gravestone. She encouraged her imagination to brood over Clara, and invested her designedly with romantic charms, in spite of pain; the ascetic zealot hugs his share of Heaven – most bitter, most blessed – in his hair-shirt and scourge, and Laetitia's happiness was to glorify Clara. Through that chosen rival, through her comprehension of the spirit of Sir Willoughby's choice of one such as Clara, she was linked to him yet.

Her mood of ecstatic fidelity was a dangerous exaltation; one that in a desert will distort the brain, and in the world where the idol dwells will put him, should he come nigh, to its own furnace-test, and get a clear brain out of a burnt heart. She was frequently at the Hall, helping to nurse Lady Patterne. Sir Willoughby had hitherto treated her as a dear insignificant friend, to whom it was unnecessary that he should mention the object of his rides to Upton Park.

He had, however, in the contemplation of what he was gaining, fallen into anxiety about what he might be losing. She belonged to his brilliant youth; her devotion was the bride of his youth; he was a man who lived backward almost as intensely as in the present; and, notwithstanding Laetitia's praiseworthy zeal in

attending on his mother, he suspected some unfaithfulness: hardly without cause: she had not looked paler of late; her eyes had not reproached him; the secret of the old days between them had been as little concealed as it was exposed. She might have buried it, after the way of woman, whose bosoms can be tombs, if we and the world allow them to be; absolutely sepulchres, where you lie dead, ghastly. Even if not dead and horrible to think of, you may be lying cold, somewhere in a corner. Even if embalmed, you may not be much visited. And how is the world to know you are embalmed? You are no better than a rotting wretch to the world that does not have peeps of you in the woman's breast, and see lights burning and an occasional exhibition of the services of worship. There are women – tell us not of her of Ephesus![4] – that have embalmed you, and have quitted the world to keep the tapers alight, and a stranger comes, and they, who have your image before them, will suddenly blow out the vestal flames and treat you as dust to fatten the garden of their bosoms for a fresh flower of love. Sir Willoughby knew it; he had experience of it in the form of the stranger; and he knew the stranger's feelings toward his predecessor and the lady.

He waylaid Laetitia, to talk of himself and his plans: the project of a run to Italy. Enviable? Yes, but in England you live the higher moral life. Italy boasts of sensual beauty; the spiritual is yours. 'I know Italy well; I have often wished to act as a cicerone to you there. As it is, I suppose I shall be with those who know the land as well as I do, and will not be particularly enthusiastic: – if you are what you were?' He was guilty of this perplexing twist from one person to another in a sentence more than once. While he talked exclusively of himself it seemed to her a condescension. In time he talked principally of her, beginning with her admirable care of his mother; and he wished to introduce 'a Miss Middleton' to her; he wanted her opinion of Miss Middleton; he relied on her intuition of character, had never known it err.

'If I supposed it could err, Miss Dale, I should not be so certain of myself. I am bound up in my good opinion of you, you see; and you must continue the same, or where shall I be?' Thus he was led to dwell upon friendship, and the charm of the friendship of men and women, 'Platonism', as it was called. 'I have laughed at it in the world, but not in the depth of my heart. The world's platonic attachments are laughable enough. You have taught me that the ideal of friendship *is* possible – when we find two who are capable of a disinterested esteem. The rest of life is duty; duty to parents, duty to country. But friendship is the holiday of those who can be friends. Wives are plentiful, friends are rare. I know *how* rare!'

Laetitia swallowed her thoughts as they sprang up. Why was he torturing her? – to give himself a holiday? She could bear to lose him – she was used to it – and bear his indifference, but not that he should disfigure himself; it made her poor. It was as if he required an oath of her when he said: 'Italy! But I shall never see a day in Italy to compare with the day of my return to England, or know a pleasure so exquisite as your welcome of me. Will you be true to that? May I look forward to just another such meeting?'

He pressed her for an answer. She gave the best she could. He was dissatisfied, and to her hearing it was hardly in the tone of manliness that he entreated her to reassure him; he womanized his language. She had to say: 'I am afraid I can not undertake to make it an appointment, Sir Willoughby,' before he recovered his alertness, which he did, for he was anything but obtuse, with the reply, 'You would keep it if you promised, and freeze at your post. So, as accidents happen, we must leave it to fate. The will's the thing. You know my detestation of changes. At least I have you for my tenant, and wherever I am, I see your light at the end of my park.'

'Neither my father nor I would willingly quit Ivy Cottage,' said Laetitia.

'So far, then,' he murmured. 'You will give me a long notice, and it must be with my consent if you think of quitting?'

'I could almost engage to do that,' she said.

'You love the place?'

'Yes; I am the most contented of cottagers.'

'I believe, Miss Dale, it would be well for my happiness were I a cottager.'

'That is the dream of the palace. But to be one, and not to wish to be other, is quiet sleep in comparison.'

'You paint a cottage in colours that tempt one to run from big houses and households.'

'You would run back to them faster, Sir Willoughby.'

'You may know me,' said he, bowing and passing on contentedly. He stopped. 'But I am not ambitious.'

'Perhaps you are too proud for ambition, Sir Willoughby.'

'You hit me to the life!'

He passed on regretfully. Clara Middleton did not study and know him like Laetitia Dale.

Laetitia was left to think it pleased him to play at cat and mouse. She had not 'hit him to the life', or she would have marvelled in acknowledging how sincere he was.

At her next sitting by the bedside of Lady Patterne she received a certain measure of insight that might have helped her to fathom him, if only she could have kept her feelings down. The old lady was affectionately confidential in talking of her one subject, her son. ‘And here is another dashing girl, my dear; she has money and health and beauty; and so has he; and it appears a fortunate union; I hope and pray it may be; but we begin to read the world when our eyes grow dim, because we read the plain lines, and I ask myself whether money and health and beauty on both sides have not been the mutual attraction. We tried it before; and that girl Durham was honest, whatever we may call her. I should have desired an appreciative thoughtful partner for him, a woman of mind, with another sort of wealth and beauty. She was honest, she ran away in time; there was a worse thing possible than that. And now we have the same chapter, and the same kind of person, who may not be quite as honest; and I shall not see the end of it. Promise me you will always be good to him; be my son’s friend; his Egeria, he names you. Be what you were to him when that girl broke his heart, and no one, not even his mother, was allowed to see that he suffered anything. Comfort him in his sensitiveness. Willoughby has the most entire faith in you. Were that destroyed – I shudder! You are, he says, and he has often said, his image of the constant woman –’

Laetitia’s hearing took in no more. She repeated to herself for days: ‘His image of the constant woman!’ Now, when he was a second time forsaking her, his praise of her constancy wore the painful ludicrousness of the look of a whimper on the face.

CHAPTER 5

Clara Middleton

THE great meeting of Sir Willoughby Patterne and Miss Middleton had taken place at Cherriton Grange, the seat of a county grandee, where this young lady of eighteen was first seen rising above the horizon. She had money and health and beauty, the triune of perfect starriness, which makes all men astronomers. He looked on her, expecting her to look at him. But as soon as he looked he found that he must be in motion to win a look in return. He was one of a pack; many were ahead of him, the whole of them were eager. He had to debate within himself how best to communicate to her that he was Willoughby Patterne, before her gloves were too much soiled to flatter his niceness, for here and there, all around, she was yielding her hand to partners – obscurant males whose touch leaves a stain. Far too generally gracious was Her Starriness to please him. The effect of it, nevertheless, was to hurry him with all his might into the heat of the chase, while yet he knew no more of her than that he was competing for a prize, and Willoughby Patterne was only one of dozens to the young lady.

A deeper student of Science than his rivals, he appreciated Nature’s compliment in the fair one’s choice of you. We now scientifically know that in this department of the universal struggle, success is awarded to the bettermost. You spread a handsomer tail than your fellows, you dress a finer top-knot, you pipe a newer note, have a longer stride; she reviews you in competition, and selects you. The superlative is magnetic to her. She may be looking elsewhere, and you will see – the superlative will simply have to beckon, away she glides. She cannot help herself; it is her nature, and her nature is the guarantee for the noblest races of men to come of her. In complimenting you, she is a promise of superior offspring. Science thus – or it is better to say – an acquaintance with science facilitates the cultivation of aristocracy. Consequently a successful pursuit and a wresting of her from a body of competitors, tells you that you are the best man. What is more, it tells the world so.

Willoughby aired his amiable superlatives in the eye of Miss Middleton; he had a leg. He was the heir of successful competitors. He had a style, a tone, an artist tailor, an authority of manner; he had in the hopeful ardour of the chase among a multitude a freshness that gave him advantage; and together with his undeviating energy when there was a prize to be won and possessed, these were scarce resistible. He spared no pains, for he was adust and athirst for the winning-post. He courted her father, aware that men likewise, and parents preeminently, have their preference for the larger offer, the deeper pocket, the broader lands, the respectfuller consideration. Men, after their fashion, as well as women, distinguish the bettermost, and aid him to succeed, as Dr Middleton certainly did in the

crisis of the memorable question proposed to his daughter within a month of Willoughby’s reception at Upton Park. The young lady was astonished at his whirlwind wooing of her, and bent to it like a sapling. She begged for time; Willoughby could barely wait. She unhesitatingly owned that she liked no one better,

and he consented. A calm examination of his position told him that it was unfair so long as he stood engaged, and she did not. She pleaded a desire to see a little of the world before she plighted herself. She alarmed him; he assumed the amazing god of love under the subtlest guise of the divinity. Willingly would he obey her behests, resignedly languish, were it not for his mother's desire to see the future lady of Patterne established there before she died. Love shone cunningly through the mask of filial duty, but the plea of urgency was reasonable. Dr Middleton thought it reasonable,

supposing his daughter to have an inclination. She had no disinclination, though she had a maidenly desire to see a little of the world – grace for one year, she said. Willoughby reduced the year to six months, and granted that term, for which, in gratitude, she submitted to stand engaged; and that was no light whispering of a word. She was implored to enter the state of captivity by the pronunciation of vows – a private but a binding ceremonial. She had health and beauty, and money to gild these gifts; not that he stipulated for money with his bride, but it adds a lustre to dazzle the world; and, moreover, the pack of rival pursuers hung close behind, yelping and raising their dolorous throats to the moon. Captive she must be.

He made her engagement no light whispering matter. It was a solemn plighting of a troth. Why not? Having said, I am yours, she could say, I am wholly yours, I am yours forever, I swear it, I will never swerve from it, I am your wife in heart, yours utterly; our engagement is written above. To this she considerately appended, 'as far as I am concerned'; a piece of somewhat chilling generosity, and he forced her to pass him through love's catechism in turn, and came out with fervent answers that bound him to her too indissolubly to let her doubt of her being loved. And I am loved! she exclaimed to her heart's echoes, in simple faith and wonderment. Hardly had she begun to think of love ere the apparition arose in her path. She had not thought of love with any warmth, and here it was. She had only dreamed of love as one of the distant blessings of the mighty world, lying somewhere in the world's forests, across wild seas, veiled, encompassed with beautiful perils, a throbbing secrecy, but too remote to quicken her bosom's throbs. Her chief idea of it was, the enrichment of the world by love.

Thus did Miss Middleton acquiesce in the principle of selection.

And then did the best man of a host blow his triumphant horn, and loudly.

He looked the fittest; he justified the dictum of Science. The survival of the Patternes was assured. 'I would,' he said to his admirer, Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, 'have bargained for health above everything, but she has everything besides –lineage, beauty, breeding: is what they call an heiress, and is the most accomplished of her sex.' With a delicate art he conveyed to the lady's understanding that Miss Middleton had been snatched from a crowd, without a breath of the crowd having offended his niceness. He did it through sarcasm at your modern young women, who run about the world nibbling and nibbled at, until they know one sex as well as the other, and are not a whit less cognizant of the market than men; pure, possibly; it is not so easy to say innocent; decidedly not our feminine ideal. Miss Middleton was different: she was the true ideal, fresh-gathered morning fruit in a basket, warranted by her bloom.

Women do not defend their younger sisters for doing what they perhaps have done – lifting a veil to be seen, and peeping at a world where innocence is as poor a guarantee as a babe's caul against shipwreck. Women of the world never think of attacking the sensual stipulation for perfect bloom, silver purity, which is redolent of the Oriental origin of the love-passion of their lords. Mrs Mountstuart congratulated Sir Willoughby on the prize he had won in the fair western-eastern.

'Let me see her,' she said; and Miss Middleton was introduced and critically observed.

She had the mouth that smiles in repose. The lips met full on the centre of the bow and thinned along to a lifting dimple; the eyelids also lifted slightly at the outer corners, and seemed, like the lip into the limpid cheek, quickening up the temples, as with a run of light, or the ascension indicated off a shoot of colour. Her features were playfellows of one another, none of them pretending to rigid correctness, nor the nose to the ordinary dignity of governess among merry girls, despite which the nose was of a fair design, not acutely interrogative or inviting to gambols. Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face: a pure, smooth-white face, tenderly flushed in the cheeks, where the gentle dints were faintly intermelting even during quietness. Her eyes were brown, set well between mild lids, often shadowed, not unwakeful. Her hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin, evidently in agreement with her taste; and the triangle suited her; but her face was not significant of a tameless wildness or of weakness; her equable shut mouth threw its long curve to guard the small round chin from that effect; her eyes wavered only in humour, they were steady when thoughtfulness was awakened; and at such seasons the build of her winter-beechwood hair lost the touch of nymph-like and whimsical, and strangely, by mere outline, added to her appearance of studious concentration. Observe the

hawk on stretched wings over the prey he spies, for an idea of this change in the look of a young lady whom Vernon Whitford could liken to the Mountain Echo, and Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson pronounced to be ‘a dainty rogue in porcelain’.

Vernon’s fancy of her must have sprung from her prompt and most musical responsiveness. He preferred the society of her learned father to that of a girl under twenty engaged to his cousin, but the charm of her ready tongue and her voice was to his intelligent understanding wit, natural wit, crystal wit, as opposed to the paste-sparkle of the wit of the town. In his encomiums he did not quote Miss Middleton’s wit; nevertheless, he ventured to speak of it to Mrs Mountstuart, causing that lady to say: ‘Ah, well, I have not noticed the wit. You may have the art of drawing it out.’

No one had noticed the wit. The corrupted hearing of people required a collision of sounds, Vernon supposed. For his part, to prove their excellence, he recollected a great many of Miss Middleton’s remarks; they came flying to him; and so long as he forbore to speak them aloud, they had a curious wealth of meaning. It could not be all her manner, however much his own manner might spoil them. It might be, to a certain degree, her quickness at catching the hue and shade of evanescent conversation. Possibly by remembering the whole of a conversation wherein she had her place, the wit was to be tested; only how could any one retain the heavy portion? As there was no use in being argumentative on a subject affording him personally, and apparently solitarily, refreshment and enjoyment, Vernon resolved to keep it to himself. The eulogies of her beauty, a possession in which he did not consider her so very conspicuous, irritated him in consequence. To flatter Sir Willoughby, it was the fashion to exalt her as one of the types of beauty; the one providentially selected to set off his masculine type. She was compared to those delicate flowers, the ladies of the Court of China, on rice-paper. A little French dressing would make her at home on the sward by the fountain among the lutes and whispers of the bewitching silken shepherdesses who live though they never were. Lady Busshe was reminded of the favourite lineaments of the women of Leonardo, the angels of Luini. Lady Culmer had seen crayon sketches of demoiselles of the French aristocracy resembling her. Some one mentioned an antique statue of a figure breathing into a flute: and the mouth at the flute-stop might have a distant semblance of the bend of her mouth, but this comparison was repelled as grotesque.

For once Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson was unsuccessful. Her ‘dainty rogue in porcelain’ displeased Sir Willoughby. ‘Why rogue?’ he said. The lady’s fame for hitting the mark fretted him, and the grace of his bride’s fine bearing stood to support him in his objection. Clara was young, healthy, handsome; she was therefore fitted to be his wife, the mother of his children, his companion picture. Certainly they looked well side by side. In walking with her, in drooping to her, the whole man was made conscious of the female image of himself by her exquisite unlikeness. She completed him, added the softer lines wanting to his portrait before the world. He had wooed her rageingly; he courted her becomingly; with the manly self-possession enlivened by watchful tact which is pleasing to girls. He never seemed to undervalue himself in valuing her: a secret priceless in the courtship of young women that have heads; the lover doubles their sense of personal worth through not forfeiting his own. Those were proud and happy days when he rode Black Norman over to Upton Park, and his lady looked forth for him and knew him coming by the faster beating of her heart.

Her mind, too, was receptive. She took impressions of his characteristics, and supplied him a feast. She remembered his chance phrases; noted his ways, his peculiarities, as no one of her sex had done. He thanked his cousin Vernon for saying she had wit. She had it, and of so high a flavour that the more he thought of the epigram launched at her the more he grew displeased. With the wit to understand him, and the heart to worship, she had a dignity rarely seen in young ladies.

‘Why rogue?’ he insisted with Mrs Mountstuart.

‘I said – in porcelain,’ she replied.

‘Rogue perplexes me.’

‘Porcelain explains it.’

‘She has the keenest sense of honour.’

‘I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude.’

‘She has a beautiful bearing.’

‘The carriage of a young princess!’

‘I find her perfect.’

‘And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain.’

‘Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma’am?’

‘Both.’

‘And which is which?’

‘There’s no distinction.’

‘Rogue and mistress of Patterne do not go together.’

‘Why not? She will be a novelty to our neighbourhood and an animation of the Hall.’

‘To be frank, rogue does not rightly match with *me*.’

‘Take her for a supplement.’

‘You like her?’

‘In love with her! I can imagine life-long amusement in her company. Attend to my advice: prize the porcelain and play with the rogue.’

Sir Willoughby nodded, unilluminated. There was nothing of rogue in himself, so there could be nothing of it in his bride. Elfishness, tricksiness, freakishness, were antipathetic to his nature; and he argued that it was impossible he should have chosen for his complement a person deserving the title. It would not have been sanctioned by his guardian genius. His closer acquaintance with Miss Middleton squared with his first impressions; you know that this is convincing; the common jury justifies the presentation of the case to them by the grand jury; and his original conclusion that she was essentially feminine, in other words, a parasite and a chalice, Clara’s conduct confirmed from day to day. He began to instruct her in the knowledge of himself without reserve, and she, as she grew less timid with him, became more reflective.

‘I judge by character,’ he said to Mrs Mountstuart.

‘If you have caught the character of a girl,’ said she.

‘I think I am not far off it.’

‘So it was thought by the man who dived for the moon in a well.’

‘How women despise their sex!’

‘Not a bit. She has no character yet. You are forming it, and pray be advised and be merry; the solid is your safest guide; physiognomy and manners will give you more of a girl’s character than all the divings you can do. She is a charming young woman, only she is one of that sort.’

‘Of what sort?’ Sir Willoughby asked, impatiently.

‘Rogues in porcelain.’

‘I am persuaded I shall never comprehend it.’

‘I cannot help you one bit further.’

‘The word rogue!’

‘It was dainty rogue.’

‘Brittle, would you say?’

‘I am quite unable to say.’

‘An innocent naughtiness?’

‘Prettily moulded in a delicate substance.’

‘You are thinking of some piece of Dresden you suppose her to resemble.’

‘I dare say.’

‘Artificial?’

‘You would not have her natural?’

‘I am heartily satisfied with her from head to foot, my dear Mrs Mountstuart.’

‘Nothing could be better. And sometimes she will lead, and generally you will lead, and everything will go well, my dear Sir Willoughby.’

Like all rapid phrasers, Mrs Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness, and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected. Her directions for the reading of Miss Middleton’s character were the same that she practised in reading Sir Willoughby’s, whose physiognomy and manners bespoke him what she presumed him to be, a splendidly proud gentleman, with good reason.

Mrs Mountstuart’s advice was wiser than her procedure, for she stopped short where he declined to begin. He dived below the surface without studying that index-page. He had won Miss Middleton’s hand; he believed he had captured her heart; but he was not so certain of his possession of her soul, and he went after it. Our enamoured gentleman had therefore no tally of Nature’s writing above to set beside his discoveries in the deeps. Now it is a dangerous accompaniment of this habit of driving, that where we do not light on the discoveries we anticipate, we fall to work sowing and planting; which becomes a disturbance of the gentle bosom. Miss Middleton’s features were legible as to the mainspring of her

character. He could have seen that she had a spirit with a natural love of liberty, and required the next thing to liberty, spaciousness, if she was to own allegiance. Those features, unhappily, instead of serving for an introduction to the within, were treated as the mirror of himself. They were indeed of an amiable sweetness to tempt an accepted lover to angle for the first person in the second. But he had made the discovery that their minds differed on one or two points, and a difference of view in his bride was obnoxious to his repose. He struck at it recurringly to show her error under various aspects. He desired to shape her character to the feminine of his own, and betrayed the surprise of a slight disappointment at her advocacy of her ideas. She said immediately: 'It is not too late, Willoughby,' and wounded him, for he wanted her simply to be material in his hands for him to mould her; he had no other thought. He lectured her on the theme of the infinity of love. How was it not too late? They were plighted; they were one eternally; they could not be parted. She listened gravely, conceiving the infinity as a narrow dwelling where a voice droned and ceased not. However, she listened. She became an attentive listener.

CHAPTER 6

His Courtship

THE world was the principal topic of dissension between these lovers. His opinion of the world affected her like a creature threatened with a deprivation of air. He explained to his darling that lovers of necessity do loathe the world. They live in the world, they accept its benefits, and assist it as well as they can. In their hearts they must despise it, shut it out, that their love for one another may pour in a clear channel, and with all the force they have. They cannot enjoy the sense of security for their love unless they fence away the world. It is, you will allow, gross; it is a beast. Formally we thank it for the good we get of it; only we two have an inner temple where the worship we conduct is actually, if you would but see it, an excommunication of the world. We abhor that beast to adore that divinity. This gives us our oneness, our isolation, our happiness. This is to love with the soul. Do you see, darling?

She shook her head; she could not see it. She would admit none of the notorious errors of the world; its backbiting, selfishness, coarseness, intrusiveness, infectiousness. She was young. She might, Willoughby thought, have let herself be led; she was not docile. She must be up in arms as a champion of the world; and one saw she was hugging her dream of a romantic world, nothing else. She spoilt the secret bower-song he delighted to tell over to her. And how, Powers of Love! is love-making to be pursued if we may not kick the world out of our bower and wash our hands of it? Love that does not spurn the world when lovers curtain themselves is a love – is it not so? – that seems to the unwhipped, scoffing world to go slinking into basiation's obscurity, instead of on a glorious march behind the screen. Our hero had a strong sentiment as to the policy of scorning the world for the sake of defending his personal pride and (to his honour, be it said) his lady's delicacy.

The act of scorning put them both above the world, said retro Sathanas![5] So much, as a piece of tactics; he was highly civilized: in the second instance, he knew it to be the world which must furnish the dry sticks for the bonfire of a woman's worship. He knew, too, that he was prescribing poetry to his betrothed, practicable poetry. She had a liking for poetry, and sometimes quoted the stuff in defiance of his pursed mouth and pained murmur: 'I am no poet'; but his poetry of the enclosed and fortified bower, without nonsensical rhymes to catch the ears of women, appeared incomprehensible to her, if not adverse. She would not burn the world for him; she would not, though a purer poetry is little imaginable, reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence, in honour of him, and so, by love's transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry. She preferred to be herself, with the egoism of women She said it: she said: 'I must be myself to be of any value to you, Willoughby.' He was indefatigable in his lectures on the aesthetics of love. Frequently, for an indemnification to her (he had no desire that she should be a loser by ceasing to admire the world), he dwelt on his own youthful ideas; and his original fancies about the world were presented to her as a substitute for the theme.

Miss Middleton bore it well, for she was sure that he meant well. Bearing so well what was distasteful to her, she became less well able to bear what she had merely noted in observation before; his view of scholarship; his manner toward Mr Vernon Whitford, of whom her father spoke warmly; the rumour concerning his treatment of a Miss Dale. And the country tale of Constantia Durham sang itself to her in a new key. He had no contempt for the world's praises. Mr Whitford wrote the letters to the county paper

which gained him applause at various great houses, and he accepted it, and betrayed a tingling fright lest he should be the victim of a sneer of the world he contemned. Recollecting his remarks, her mind was afflicted by the 'something illogical' in him that we readily discover when our natures are no longer running free, and then at once we yearn for a disputation. She resolved that she would one day, one distant day, provoke it – upon what? The special point eluded her. The world is too huge a client, and too pervious, too spotty, for a girl to defend against a man. That 'something illogical' had stirred her feelings more than her intellect to revolt. She could not constitute herself the advocate of Mr Whitford. Still she marked the disputation for an event to come.

Meditating on it, she fell to picturing Sir Willoughby's face at the first accents of his bride's decided disagreement with him. The picture once conjured up would not be laid. He was handsome; so correctly handsome, that a slight unfriendly touch precipitated him into caricature. His habitual air of happy pride, of indignant contentment rather, could easily be overdone. Surprise, when he threw emphasis on it, stretched him with the tall eyebrows of a mask – limitless under the spell of caricature; and in time, whenever she was not pleased by her thoughts, she had that, and not his likeness, for the vision of him. And it was unjust, contrary to her deeper feelings; she rebuked herself, and as much as her naughty spirit permitted, she tried to look on him as the world did; an effort inducing reflections upon the blessings of ignorance. She seemed to herself beset by a circle of imps, hardly responsible for her thoughts.

He outshone Mr Whitford in his behaviour to young Crossjay. She had seen him with the boy, and he was amused, indulgent, almost frolicsome, in contradistinction to Mr Whitford's tutorly sharpness. He had the English father's tone of a liberal allowance for boys' tastes and pranks, and he ministered to the partiality of the genus for pocket-money. He did not play the schoolmaster, like bookworms who get poor little lads in their grasp.

Mr Whitford avoided her very much. He came to Upton Park on a visit to her father, and she was not particularly sorry that she saw him only at table. He treated her by fits to a level scrutiny of deep-set eyes unpleasantly penetrating. She had liked his eyes. They became unbearable; they dwelt in the memory as if they had left a phosphorescent line. She had been taken by playmate boys in her infancy to peep into hedge-leaves, where the mother-bird brooded on the nest; and the eyes of the bird in that marvellous dark thickset home, had sent her away with worlds of fancy. Mr Whitford's gaze revived her susceptibility, but not the old happy wondering. She was glad of his absence, after a certain hour that she passed with Willoughby, a wretched hour to remember. Mr Whitford had left, and Willoughby came, bringing bad news of his mother's health. Lady Patterne was fast failing. Her son spoke of the loss she would be to him; he spoke of the dreadfulness of death. He alluded to his own death to come carelessly, with a philosophical air.

'All of us must go! our time is short.'

'Very,' she assented.

It sounded like want of feeling.

'If you lose me, Clara!'

'But you are strong, Willoughby.'

'I may be cut off to-morrow.'

'Do not talk in such a manner.'

'It is as well that it should be faced.'

'I cannot see what purpose it serves.'

'Should you lose me, my love!'

'Willoughby!'

'Oh, the bitter pang of leaving you!'

'Dear Willoughby, you are distressed; your mother may recover; let us hope she will; I will help to nurse her; I have offered, you know; I am ready, most anxious. I believe I am a good nurse.'

'It is this belief – that one does not die with death!'

'That is our comfort.'

'When we love?'

'Does it not promise that we meet again?'

'To walk the world and see you perhaps – with another!'

'See me? – Where? Here?'

'Wedded… to another. You! my bride; whom I call mine; and you are! You would be still – in that horror! But all things are possible; women are women; they swim in infidelity, from wave to wave! I know them.'

'Willoughby, do not torment yourself and me, I beg you.'

He meditated profoundly, and asked her: ‘Could you be such a saint among women?’

‘I think I am a more than usually childish girl.’

‘Not to forget me?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Still to be mine?’

‘I am yours.’

‘To plight yourself?’

‘It is done.’

‘Be mine beyond death?’

‘Married is married, I think.’

‘Clara! to dedicate your life to our love! Never one touch; not one whisper! not a thought, not a dream! Could you – it agonizes me to imagine… be inviolate? mine above? – mine before all men, though I am gone: – true to my dust? Tell me. Give me that assurance. True to my name! – Oh, I hear them. “His relict.” Buzzings about Lady Patterne. “The widow.” If you knew their talk of widows! Shut your ears, my angel! But if she holds them off and keeps her path, they are forced to respect her. The dead husband is not the dishonoured wretch they fancied him, because he was out of their way. He lives in the heart of his wife. Clara! my Clara! as I live in yours, whether here or away; whether you are a wife or widow, there is no distinction for love – I am your husband – say it – eternally. I must have peace; I cannot endure the pain. Depressed, yes; I have cause to be. But it has haunted me ever since we joined hands. To have you – to lose you!’

‘Is it not possible that I may be the first to die?’ said Miss Middleton.

‘And lose you, with the thought that you, lovely as you are, and the dogs of the world barking round you, might… Is it any wonder that I have my feeling for the world? This hand! – the thought is horrible. You would be surrounded; men are brutes; the scent of unfaithfulness excites them, overjoys them. And I helpless! The thought is maddening. I see a ring of monkeys grinning. There is your beauty, and man’s delight in desecrating. You would be worried night and day to quit my name, to… I feel the blow now. You would have no rest for them, nothing to cling to without your oath.’

‘An oath!’ said Miss Middleton.

‘It is no delusion, my love, when I tell you that with this thought upon me I see a ring of monkey faces grinning at me; they haunt me. But you do swear it! Once, and I will never trouble you on the subject again. My weakness! if you like. You will learn that it is love, a man’s love, stronger than death.’

‘An oath?’ she said, and moved her lips to recall what she might have said and forgotten. ‘To what? what oath?’

‘That you will be true to me dead as well as living! Whisper it.’

‘Willoughby, I shall be true to my vows at the altar.’

‘To me! me!’

‘It will be to you.’

‘To my soul. No heaven can be for me – I see none, only torture, unless I have your word, Clara. I trust it. I will trust it implicitly. My confidence in you is absolute.’

‘Then you need not be troubled.’

‘It is for *you*, my love; that you may be armed and strong when I am not by to protect you.’

‘Our views of the world are opposed, Willoughby.’

‘Consent; gratify me; swear it. Say: “Beyond death.” Whisper it. I ask for nothing more. Women think the husband’s grave breaks the bond, cuts the tie, sets them loose. They wed the flesh – pah! What I call on you for is nobility; the transcendent nobility of faithfulness beyond death. “*His* widow!’ let them say; a saint in widowhood.’

‘My vows at the altar must suffice.’

‘You will not? Clara!’

‘I am plighted to you.’

‘Not a word? – a simple promise? But you love me?’

‘I have given you the best proof of it that I can.’

‘Consider how utterly I place confidence in you.’

‘I hope it is well placed.’

‘I could kneel to you, to worship you, if you would, Clara!’

‘Kneel to Heaven, not to me, Willoughby. I am – I wish I were able to tell what I am. I may be inconstant; I do not know myself. Think; question yourself whether I am really the person you should marry. Your wife should have great qualities of mind and soul. I will consent to hear that I do not possess them, and abide by the verdict.’

‘You do; you do possess them!’ Willoughby cried. ‘When you know better what the world is, you will understand my

anxiety. Alive, I am strong to shield you from it; dead, helpless – that is all. You would be clad in mail, steel-proof, inviolable, if you would… But try to enter into my mind; think with me, feel with me. When you have once comprehended the intensity of the love of a man like me, you will not require asking. It is the difference of the elect and the vulgar; of the ideal of love from the coupling of the herds. We will let it drop. At least, I have your hand. As long as I live I have your hand. Ought I not to be satisfied? I am; only I see further than most men, and feel more deeply. And now I must ride to my mother’s bedside. She dies Lady Patterne! It might have been that she… But she is a woman of women! With a father-in-law![6] Just heaven! Could I have stood by her

then with the same feelings of reverence? A very little, my love, and everything gained for us by civilization crumbles; we fall back to the first mortar-bowl we were bruised and stirred in. My thoughts, when I take my stand to watch by her, come to this conclusion, that, especially in women, distinction is the thing to be aimed at. Otherwise we are a weltering human mass. Women must teach us to venerate them, or we may as well be bleating and barking and bellowing. So, now enough. You have but to think a little. I must be off. It may have happened during my absence. I will write. I shall hear from you? Come and see me mount Black Norman. My respects to your father. I have no time to pay them in person. One!’

He took the one – love’s mystical number – from which commonly spring multitudes; but, on the present occasion, it was a single one, and cold. She watched him riding away on his gallant horse, as handsome a cavalier as the world could show, and the contrast of his recent language and his fine figure was a riddle that froze her blood. Speech so foreign to her ears, unnatural in tone, unmanlike even for a lover (who is allowed a softer dialect), set her vainly sounding for the source and drift of it. She was glad of not having to encounter eyes like Mr Vernon Whitford’s.

On behalf of Sir Willoughby, it is to be said that his mother, without infringing on the degree of respect for his decisions and sentiments exacted by him, had talked to him of Miss Middleton, suggesting a volatility of temperament in the young lady that struck him as consentaneous with Mrs Mountstuart’s ‘rogue in porcelain’, and alarmed him as the independent observations of two world-wise women. Nor was it incumbent upon him personally to credit the volatility in order, as far as he could, to effect the soul-insurance of his bride, that he might hold the security of the policy. The desire for it was in him; his mother had merely tolled a warning bell that he had put in motion before. Clara was not a Constantia. But she was a woman, and he had been deceived by women, as a man fostering his high ideal of them will surely be. The strain he adopted was quite natural to his passion and his theme. The language of the primitive sentiments of men is of the same expression at all times, minus the primitive colours when a modern gentleman addresses his lady.

Lady Patterne died in the winter season of the new year. In April Dr Middleton had to quit Upton Park, and he had not found a place of residence, nor did he quite know what to do with himself in the prospect of his daughter’s marriage and desertion of him. Sir Willoughby proposed to find him a house within a circuit of the neighbourhood of Patterne. Moreover, he invited the Rev. Doctor and his daughter to come to Patterne from Upton for a month, and make acquaintance with his aunts, the ladies Eleanor and Isabel Patterne, so that it might not be so strange to Clara to have them as her housemates after her marriage. Dr Middleton omitted to consult his daughter before accepting the invitation, and it appeared, when he did speak to her, that it should have been done. But she said, mildly, ‘Very well, papa.’

Sir Willoughby had to visit the metropolis and an estate in another county, whence he wrote to his betrothed daily. He returned to Patterne in time to arrange for the welcome of his guests; too late, however, to ride over to them; and, meanwhile, during his absence, Miss Middleton had bethought herself that she ought to have given her last days of freedom to her friends. After the weeks to be passed at Patterne, very few weeks were left to her, and she had a wish to run to Switzerland or Tyrol and see the Alps; a quaint idea, her father thought. She repeated it seriously, and Dr Middleton perceived a feminine shuttle of indecision at work in her head, frightful to him, considering that they signified hesitation between the excellent library and capital wine-cellar of Patterne Hall, together with the society of that promising young scholar, Mr Vernon Whitford, on the one side, and a career of hotels – equivalent to being rammed into monster artillery with a crowd every night, and shot off on a day’s journey through space every morning –

on the other.

'You will have your travelling and your Alps after the ceremony,' he said.

'I think I would rather stay at home,' said she.

Dr Middleton rejoined: '*I* would.'

'But I am not married yet, papa.'

'As good, my dear.'

'A little change of scene, I thought…'

'We have accepted Willoughby's invitation. And he helps me to a house near you.'

'You wish to be near me, papa?'

'Proximate – at a remove: communicable.'

'Why should we separate?'

'For the reason, my dear, that you exchange a father for a husband.'

'If I do not want to exchange?'

'To purchase, you must pay, my child. Husbands are not given for nothing.'

'No. But I should have you, papa!'

'Should?'

'They have not yet parted us, dear papa.'

'What does that mean?' he asked, fussily. He was in a gentle stew already, apprehensive of a disturbance of the serenity precious to scholars by postponements of the ceremony and a prolongation of a father's worries.

'Oh, the common meaning, papa,' she said, seeing how it was with him.

'Ah!' said he, nodding and blinking gradually back to a state of composure, glad to be appeased on any terms; for mutability is but another name for the sex, and it is the enemy of the scholar.

She suggested that two weeks of Patterne would offer plenty of time to inspect the empty houses of the district, and should be sufficient, considering the claims of friends, and the necessity of going the round of London shops.

'Two or three weeks,' he agreed, hurriedly, by way of compromise with that fearful prospect.

CHAPTER 7

The Betrothed

DURING the drive from Upton to Patterne, Miss Middleton hoped, she partly believed, that there was to be a change in Sir Willoughby's manner of courtship. He had been so different a wooer. She remembered with some half-conscious desperation of fervour what she had thought of him at his first approaches, and in accepting him. Had she seen him with the eyes of the world, thinking they were her own? That look of his, the look of 'indignant contentment', had then been a most noble conquering look, splendid as a general's plume at the gallop. It could not have altered. Was it that her eyes had altered?

The spirit of those days rose up within her to reproach her and whisper of their renewal: she remembered her rosy dreams and the image she had of him, her throbbing pride in him, her choking richness of happiness: and also her vain attempting to be very humble, usually ending in a carol, quaint to think of, not without charm, but quaint, puzzling.

Now men whose incomes have been restricted to the extent that they must live on their capital, soon grow relieved of the forethoughtful anguish wasting them by the hilarious comforts of the lap upon which they have sunk back, insomuch that they are apt to solace themselves for their intolerable anticipations of famine in the household by giving loose to one fit or more of reckless lavishness. Lovers in like manner live on their capital from failure of income: they, too, for the sake of stifling apprehension and piping to the present hour, are lavish of their stock, so as rapidly to attenuate it: they have their fits of intoxication in view of coming famine: they force memory into play, love retrospectively, enter the old house of the past and ravage the larder, and would gladly, even resolutely, continue in illusion if it were possible for the broadest honey-store of reminiscences to hold out for a length of time against a mortal appetite: which in

good sooth stands on the alternative of a consumption of the hive or of the creature it is for nourishing. Here do lovers show that they are perishable. More than the poor clay world they need fresh supplies, right wholesome juices; as it were, life in the burst of the bud, fruits yet on the tree, rather than potted provender. The latter is excellent for by-and-by, when there will be a vast deal more to remember, and appetite shall have but one tooth remaining. Should their minds perchance have been saturated by their first impressions and have retained them, loving by the accountable light of reason, they may have fair harvests, as in the early time; but that case is rare. In other words, love is an affair of two, and is only for two that can be as quick, as constant in intercommunication as are sun and earth, through the cloud or face to face. They take their breath of life from one another in signs of affection, proofs of faithfulness,

incentives to admiration. Thus it is with men and women in love's good season. But a solitary soul dragging a log must make the log a God to rejoice in the burden. That is not love.

Clara was the least fitted of all women to drag a log. Few girls would be so rapid in exhausting capital. She was feminine indeed, but she wanted comradeship, a living and frank exchange of the best in both, with the deeper feelings untroubled. To be fixed at the mouth of a mine, and to have to descend it daily, and not to discover great opulence below; on the contrary, to be chilled in subterranean sunlessness, without any substantial quality that she could grasp, only the mystery of the inefficient tallow-light in those caverns of the complacent-talking man: this appeared to her too extreme a probation for two or three weeks. How of a life-time of it!

She was compelled by her nature to hope, expect and believe that Sir Willoughby would again be the man she had known when she accepted him. Very singularly, to show her simple spirit at the time, she was unaware of any physical coldness to him; she knew of nothing but her mind at work, objecting to this and that, desiring changes. She did not dream of being on the giddy ridge of the passive or negative sentiment of love, where one step to the wrong side precipitates us into the state of repulsion.

Her eyes were lively at their meeting – so were his. She liked to see him on the steps, with young Crossjay under his arm. Sir Willoughby told her in his pleasantest humour of the boy's having got into the laboratory that morning to escape his task-master, and blown out the windows. She administered a chiding to the delinquent in the same spirit, while Sir Willoughby led her on his arm across the threshold, whispering: 'Soon for good!' In reply to the whisper, she begged for more of the story of young Crossjay. 'Come into the laboratory,' said he, a little less laughingly than softly; and Clara begged her father to come and see young Crossjay's latest pranks. Sir Willoughby whispered to her of the length of their separation, and his joy to welcome her to the house where she would reign as mistress *very* soon. He numbered the weeks. He whispered: 'Come.' In the hurry of the moment she did not examine a lightning terror that shot through her. It passed, and was no more than the shadow which bends the summer grasses, leaving a ruffle of her ideas, in wonder of her having feared herself for something. Her father was with them. She and Willoughby were not yet alone.

Young Crossjay had not accomplished so fine a piece of destruction as Sir Willoughby's humour proclaimed of him. He had connected a battery with a train of gunpowder, shattering a window-frame and unsettling some bricks. Dr Middleton asked if the youth was excluded from the library, and rejoiced to hear that it was a sealed door to him. Thither they went. Vernon Whitford was away on one of his long walks.

'There, papa, you see he is not so very faithful to you,' said Clara.

Dr Middleton stood frowning over MS notes on the table, in Vernon's handwriting. He flung up the hair from his forehead and dropped into a seat to inspect them closely. He was now immoveable. Clara was obliged to leave him there. She was led to think that Willoughby had drawn them to the library with the design to be rid of her protector, and she began to fear him. She proposed to pay her respects to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. They were not seen, and a footman reported in the drawing-room that they were out driving. She grasped young Crossjay's hand. Sir Willoughby dispatched him to Mrs Montague, the housekeeper, for a tea of cakes and jam.

'Off!' he said, and the boy had to run.

Clara saw herself without a shield.

'And the garden!' she cried. 'I love the garden; I must go and see what flowers are up with you. In spring I care most for wild flowers, and if you will show me daffodils, and crocuses and anemones…'

'My dearest Clara! my bride!' said he.

'Because they are vulgar flowers?' she asked him, artlessly, to account for his detaining her.

Why would he not wait to deserve her! – no, not deserve –to reconcile her with her real position; not reconcile, but to repair the image of him in her mind, before he claimed his apparent right!

He did not wait. He pressed her to his bosom.

‘You are mine, my Clara – utterly mine; every thought, every feeling. We are one: the world may do its worst. I have been longing for you, looking forward. You save me from a thousand vexations. One is perpetually crossed. That is all outside us. We two! With you I am secure! Soon! I could not tell you whether the world’s alive or dead. My dearest!’

She came out of it with the sensations of the frightened child that has had its dip in sea-water, sharpened to think that after all it was not so severe a trial. Such was her idea; and she said to herself immediately: What am I that I should complain? Two minutes earlier she would not have thought it; but humiliated pride falls lower than humbleness.

She did not blame him; she fell in her own esteem; less because she was the betrothed Clara Middleton, which was now palpable as a shot in the breast of a bird, than that she was a captured woman, of whom it is absolutely expected that she must submit, and when she would rather be gazing at flowers. Clara had shame of her sex. They cannot take a step without becoming bondwomen: into what a slavery! For herself, her trial was over, she thought. As for herself, she merely complained of a prematureness and crudity best unanalyzed. In truth, she could hardly be said to complain. She did but criticize him and wonder that a man was unable to perceive, or was not arrested by perceiving, unwillingness, discordance, dull compliance; the bondwoman’s due instead of the bride’s consent. Oh, sharp distinction, as between two spheres!

She meted him justice; she admitted that he had spoken in a lover-like tone. Had it not been for the iteration of ‘the world’, she would not have objected critically to his words, though they were words of downright appropriation. He had the right to use them, since she was to be married to him. But if he had only waited before playing the privileged lover!

Sir Willoughby was enraptured with her. Even so purely coldly, statue-like, Dian-like, would he have prescribed his bride’s reception of his caress. The suffusion of crimson coming over her subsequently, showing her divinely feminine in reflective bashfulness, agreed with his highest definitions of female character.

‘Let me conduct you to the garden, my love,’ he said.

She replied: ‘I think I would rather go to my room.’

‘I will send you a wild-flower posy.’

‘Flowers, no; I do not like them to be gathered.’

‘I will wait for you on the lawn.’

‘My head is rather heavy.’

His deep concern and tenderness brought him close.

She assured him sparklingly that she was well: she was ready to accompany him to the garden and stroll over the park.

‘Head*ache* it is not,’ she said.

But she had to pay the fee for inviting a solicitous accepted gentleman’s proximity.

This time she blamed herself and him, and the world he abused, and destiny into the bargain. And she cared less about the probation; but she craved for liberty. With a frigidity that astonished her, she marvelled at the act of kissing, and at the obligation it forced upon an inanimate person to be an accomplice. Why was she not free? By what strange right was it that she was treated as a possession?

‘I will try to walk off the heaviness,’ she said.

‘My own girl must not fatigue herself.’

‘Oh, no; I shall not.’

‘Sit with me. Your Willoughby is your devoted attendant.’

‘I have a desire for the air.’

‘Then we will walk out.’

She was horrified to think how far she had drawn away from him, and now placed her hand on his arm to appease her self-accusations and propitiate duty. He spoke as she had wished, his manner was what she had wished; she was his bride, almost his wife; her conduct was a kind of madness; she could not understand it.

Good sense and duty counselled her to control her wayward spirit.

He fondled her hand, and to that she grew accustomed; her hand was at a distance. And what is a hand? Leaving it where it was, she treated it as a link between herself and dutiful goodness. Two months hence she was a bondwoman for life! She regretted that she had not gone to her room to strengthen herself with a review of her situation, and meet him thoroughly resigned to her fate. She fancied she would have come down to him amicably. It was his present respectfulness and easy conversation that tricked her burning

nerves with the fancy. Five weeks of perfect liberty in the mountains, she thought, would have prepared her for the days of bells. All that she required was a separation offering new scenes, where she might reflect undisturbed, feel clear again.

He led her about the flower-beds; too much as if he were giving a convalescent an airing. She chafed at it, and pricked herself with remorse. In contrition she expatiated on the beauty of the garden.

'All is yours, my Clara.'

An oppressive load it seemed to her! She passively yielded to the man in his form of attentive courtier; his mansion, estate, and wealth overwhelmed her. They suggested the price to be paid. Yet she recollected that on her last departure through the park she had been proud of the rolling green and spreading trees. Poison of some sort must be operating in her. She had not come to him to-day with this feeling of sullen antagonism; she had caught it here.

'You have been well, my Clara?'

'Quite.'

'Not a hint of illness?'

'None.'

'My bride must have her health if all the doctors in the kingdom die for it! My darling!'

'And tell me: the dogs?'

'Dogs and horses are in very good condition.'

'I am glad. Do you know, I love those ancient French châteaux and farms in one, where salon windows look on poultry-yard and stalls. I like that homeliness with beasts and peasants.'

He bowed indulgently.

'I am afraid we can't do it for you in England, my Clara.'

'No.'

'And I like the farm,' said he. 'But I think our drawing-rooms have a better atmosphere off the garden. As to our peasantry, we cannot, I apprehend, modify our class demarcations without risk of disintegrating the social structure.'

'Perhaps. I proposed nothing.'

'My love, I would entreat you to propose if I were convinced that I could obey.'

'You are very good.'

'I find my merit nowhere but in your satisfaction.'

Although she was not thirsting for dulcet sayings, the peacefulness of other than invitations to the exposition of his mysteries and of their isolation in oneness, inspired her with such calm that she beat about in her brain, as if it were in the brain, for the specific injury he had committed. Sweeping from sensation to sensation, the young, whom sensations impel and distract, can rarely date their disturbance from a particular one; unless it be some great villain injury that has been done; and Clara had not felt an individual shame in his caress; the shame of her sex was but a passing protest, that left no stamp. So she conceived she had been behaving cruelly, and said, 'Willoughby'; because she was aware of the omission of his name in her previous remarks.

His whole attention was given to her.

She had to invent the sequel: 'I was going to beg you, Willoughby, do not seek to spoil me. You compliment me. Compliments are not suited to me. You think too highly of me. It is nearly as bad as to be slighted. I am… I am a…' But she could not follow his example; even as far as she had gone, her prim little sketch of herself, set beside her real, ugly, earnest feelings, rang of a mincing simplicity, and was a step in falseness. How could she display what she was?

'Do I not know you?' he said.

The melodious bass notes, expressive of conviction on that point, signified as well as the words that no answer was the right answer. She could not dissent without turning his music to discord, his complacency to amazement. She held her tongue, knowing that he did not know her, and speculating on the division made bare by their degrees of the knowledge, a deep cleft.

He alluded to friends in her neighbourhood and his own. The bridesmaids were mentioned.

'Miss Dale, you will hear from my aunt Eleanor, declines, on the plea of indifferent health. She is rather a morbid person, with all her really estimable qualities. It will do no harm to have none but young ladies of your own age; a bouquet of young buds: though one blowing flower among them… However, she has decided. My principal annoyance has been Vernon's refusal to act as my best man.'

‘Mr Whitford refuses?’

‘He half refuses. I do not take no from him. His pretext is a dislike to the ceremony.’

‘I share it with him.’

‘I sympathize with you. If we might say the words and pass from sight! There is a way of cutting off the world: I have it at times completely: I lose it again, as if it were a cabalistic phrase one had to utter. But with you! You give it me for good. It will be for ever, eternally, my Clara. Nothing can harm, nothing touch us; we are one another’s. Let the world fight it out; we have nothing to do with it.’

‘If Mr Whitford should persist in refusing?’

‘So entirely one, that there never can be question of external influences. I am, we will say, riding home from the hunt: I see you awaiting me: I read your heart as though you were beside me. And I know that I am coming to the one who reads mine! You have me, you have me like an open book, you, and only you!’

‘I am to be always at home?’ Clara said, unheeded, and relieved by his not hearing.

‘Have you realized it? – that we are invulnerable! The world cannot hurt us: it cannot touch us. Felicity is ours, and we are impervious in the enjoyment of it. Something divine! surely something divine on earth? Clara! – being to one another that between which the world can never interpose! What I do is right: what you do is right. Perfect to one another! Each new day we rise to study and delight in new secrets. Away with the crowd! We have not even to say it; we are in an atmosphere where the world cannot breathe.’

‘Oh, the world!’ Clara partly carolled on a sigh that sunk deep.

Hearing him talk as one exulting on the mountain-top, when she knew him to be in the abyss, was very strange, provocative of scorn.

‘My letters?’ he said, incitingly.

‘I read them.’

‘Circumstances have imposed a long courtship on us, my Clara; and I, perhaps lamenting the laws of decorum – I have done so! – still felt the benefit of the gradual initiation. It is not good for women to be surprised by a sudden revelation of man’s character. We also have things to learn – there is matter for learning everywhere. Some day you will tell me the difference of what you think of me now, from what you thought when we first…?’

An impulse of double-minded acquiescence caused Clara to stammer as on a sob:

‘I – I daresay I shall.’

She added, ‘If it is necessary.’

Then she cried out: ‘Why do you attack the world? You always make me pity it.’

He smiled at her youthfulness. ‘I have passed through that stage. It leads to my sentiment. Pity it, by all means.’

‘No,’ said she, ‘but pity it, side with it, not consider it so bad. The world has faults; glaciers have crevices, mountains have chasms; but is not the effect of the whole sublime? Not to admire the mountain and the glacier because they can be cruel, seems to me… And the world is beautiful.’

‘The world of nature, yes. The world of men?’

‘Yes.’

‘My love, I suspect you to be thinking of the world of ball-rooms.’

‘I am thinking of the world that contains real and great generosity, true heroism. We see it round us.’

‘We read of it. The world of the romance writer!’

‘No: the living world. I am sure it is our duty to love it. I am sure we weaken ourselves if we do not. If I did not, I should be looking on mist, hearing a perpetual boom instead of music. I remember hearing Mr Whitford say that cynicism is intellectual dandyism without the coxcomb’s feathers; and it seems to me that cynics are only happy in making the world as barren to others as they have made it for themselves.’

‘Old Vernon!’ ejaculated Sir Willoughby, with a countenance rather uneasy, as if it had been flicked with a glove. ‘He strings his phrases by the dozen.’

‘Papa contradicts that, and says he is very clever and very simple.’

‘As to cynics, my dear Clara, oh, certainly, certainly: you are right. They are laughable, contemptible. But understand me, I mean, we cannot feel, or if we feel we cannot so intensely feel, our oneness, except by dividing ourselves from the world.’

‘Is it an art?’

‘If you like. It is our poetry! But does not love shun the world? Two that love must have their sustenance in isolation.’

‘No: they will be eating themselves up.’

‘The purer the beauty, the more it will be out of the world.’

‘But not opposed.’

‘Put it in this way,’ Willoughby condescended. ‘Has experience the same opinion of the world as ignorance?’

‘It should have more charity.’

‘Does virtue feel at home in the world?’

‘Where it should be an example, to my idea.’

‘Is the world agreeable to holiness?’

‘Then, are you in favour of monasteries?’

He poured a little runlet of half laughter over her head, of the sound assumed by genial compassion.

It is irritating to hear that when we imagine we have spoken to the point.

‘Now in my letters, Clara –’

‘I have no memory, Willoughby!’

‘You will, however, have observed that I am not completely myself in my letters –’

‘In your letters to men you may be.’

The remark threw a pause across his thoughts. He was of a sensitiveness terribly tender. A single stroke on it reverberated swellingly within the man, and most, and infuriately searching, at the spots where he had been wounded, especially where he feared the world might have guessed the wound. Did she imply that he had no hand for love-letters? Was it her meaning that women would not have much taste for his epistolary correspondence? She had spoken in the plural, with an accent on ‘men’. Had she heard of Constantia? Had she formed her own judgement about the creature? The supernatural sensitiveness of Sir Willoughby shrieked a peal of affirmatives. He had often meditated on the moral obligation of his unfolding to Clara the whole truth of his conduct to Constantia; for whom, as for other suicides, there were excuses. He at least was bound to supply them. She had behaved badly; but had he not given her some cause? If so, manliness was bound to confess it.

Supposing Clara heard the world’s version first! Men whose pride is their backbone suffer convulsions where other men are barely aware of a shock, and Sir Willoughby was taken with galvanic jumpings of the spirit within him, at the idea of the world whispering to Clara that he had been jilted.

‘My letters to men, you say, my love?’

‘Your letters of business.’

‘Completely myself in my letters of business?’ He stared indeed.

She relaxed the tension of his figure by remarking: ‘You are able to express yourself to men as your meaning dictates. In writing to… to us it is, I suppose, more difficult.’

‘True, my love. I will not exactly say difficult. I can acknowledge no difficulty. Language, I should say, is not fitted to express emotion. Passion rejects it.’

‘For dumb-show and pantomime?’

‘No; but the writing of it coldly.’

‘Ah, coldly!’

‘My letters disappoint you?’

‘I have not implied that they do.’

‘My feelings, dearest, are too strong for transcription. I feel, pen in hand, like the mythological Titan at war with Jove, strong enough to hurl mountains, and finding nothing but pebbles. The simile is a good one. You must not judge of me by my letters.’

‘I do not; I like them,’ said Clara.

She blushed, eyed him hurriedly, and seeing him complacent, resumed, ‘I prefer the pebble to the mountain; but if you read poetry you would not think human speech incapable of…’

‘My love, I detest artifice. Poetry is a profession.’

‘Our poets would prove to you…’

‘As I have often observed, Clara, I am no poet.’

‘I have not accused you, Willoughby.’

‘No poet, and with no wish to be a poet. Were I one, my life would supply material, I can assure you, my love. My conscience is not entirely at rest. Perhaps the heaviest matter troubling it is that in which I was

least wilfully guilty. You have heard of a Miss Durham?'

'I have heard – yes – of her.'

'She may be happy. I trust she is. If she is not, I cannot escape some blame. An instance of the difference between myself and the world, now. The world charges it upon her. I have interceded to exonerate her.'

'That was generous, Willoughby.'

'Stay. I fear I was the primary offender. But I, Clara, I, under a sense of honour, acting under a sense of honour, would have carried my engagement through.'

'What had you done?'

'The story is long, dating from an early day, in the "downy antiquity of my youth", as Vernon says.'

'Mr Whitford says that?'

'One of old Vernon's odd sayings. It's a story of an early fascination.'

'Papa tells me Mr Whitford speaks at times with wise humour.'

'Family considerations – the lady's health among other things; her position in the calculations of relatives – intervened. Still there was the fascination. I have to own it. Grounds for feminine jealousy.'

'Is it at an end?'

'Now? with you? my darling Clara! indeed at an end, or could I have opened my inmost heart to you! Could I have spoken of myself so unreservedly that in part you know me as I know myself! Oh, but would it have been possible to enclose you with myself in that intimate union? so secret, unassailable!'

'You did not speak to her as you speak to me?'

'In no degree.'

'What *could* have…' Clara checked the murmured exclamation.

Sir Willoughby's expoundings on his latest of texts would have poured forth, had not a footman stepped across the lawn to inform him that his builder was in the laboratory and requested permission to consult with him.

Clara's plea of a horror of the talk of bricks and joists excused her from accompanying him. He had hardly been satisfied by her manner, he knew not why. He left her, convinced that he must do and say more to reach down to her female intelligence.

She saw young Crossjay, springing with pots of jam in him, join his patron at a bound, and taking a lift of arms, fly aloft, clapping heels. Her reflections were confused. Sir Willoughby was admirable with the lad. 'Is he two men?' she thought; and the thought ensued, 'Am I unjust?' She headed a run with young Crossjay to divert her mind.

CHAPTER 8

A Run with the Truant; a Walk with the Master

THE sight of Miss Middleton running inflamed young Crossjay with the passion of the game of hare and hounds. He shouted a view-halloo, and flung up his legs. She was fleet; she ran as though a hundred little feet were bearing her onward smooth as water over the lawn and the sweeps of grass of the park, so swiftly did the hidden pair multiply one another to speed her. So sweet was she in her flowing pace, that the boy, as became his age, translated admiration into a dogged frenzy of pursuit, and continued pounding along, when far outstripped, determined to run her down or die. Suddenly her flight wound to an end in a dozen twittering steps, and she sank. Young Crossjay attained her, with just breath enough to say: 'You are a runner!'

'I forgot you had been having your tea, my poor boy,' said she.

'And you don't pant a bit!' was his encomium.

'Dear me, no; not more than a bird. You might as well try to catch a bird.'

Young Crossjay gave a knowing nod. 'Wait till I get my second wind.'

'Now you must confess that girls run faster than boys.'

'They may at the start.'

‘They do everything better.’

‘They’re flash-in-the-pans.’

‘They learn their lessons.’

‘You can’t make soldiers or sailors of them, though.’

‘And that is untrue. Have you never read of Mary Ambree? and Mistress Hannah Snell of Pondicherry? And there was the bride of the celebrated William Taylor. And what do you say to Joan of Arc? What do you say to Boadicea? I suppose you have never heard of the Amazons.’

‘They weren’t English.’

‘Then it is your own countrywomen you decry, sir!’

Young Crossjay betrayed anxiety about his false position, and begged for the stories of Mary Ambree and the others who were English.

‘See, you will not read for yourself, you hide and play truant with Mr Whitford, and the consequence is you are ignorant of your country’s history.’ Miss Middleton rebuked him, enjoying his wriggle between a perception of her fun and an acknowledgment of his peccancy. She commanded him to tell her which was the glorious Valentine’s day of our naval annals;[7] the name of the hero of the day, and the name of his ship. To these questions his answers were as ready as the guns of the good ship *Captain*, for the Spanish four-decker.

‘And that you owe to Mr Whitford,’ said Miss Middleton.

‘He bought me the books,’ young Crossjay growled, and plucked at grass blades and bit them, foreseeing dimly but certainly the termination of all this.

Miss Middleton lay back on the grass and said: ‘Are you going to be fond of me, Crossjay?’

The boy sat blinking. His desire was to prove to her that he was immoderately fond of her already; and he might have flown at her neck had she been sitting up, but her recumbency and eyelids half closed excited wonder in him and awe. His young heart beat fast.

‘Because, my dear boy,’ she said, leaning on her elbow, ‘you are a very nice boy, but an ungrateful boy, and there is no telling whether you will not punish any one who cares for you. Come along with me; pluck me some of these cowslips, and the speedwells near them; I think we both love wild flowers.’ She rose and took his arm. ‘You shall row me on the lake while I talk to you seriously.’

It was she, however, who took the sculls at the boat-house, for she had been a playfellow with boys, and knew that one of them engaged in a manly exercise is not likely to listen to a woman.

‘Now, Crossjay,’ she said. Dense gloom overcame him like a cowl. She bent across her hands to laugh. ‘As if I were going to lecture you, you silly boy!’ He began to brighten dubiously. ‘I used to be as fond of birdsnesting as you are. I like brave boys, and I like you for wanting to enter the Royal Navy. Only, how can you if you do not learn? You must get the captains to pass you, you know. Somebody spoils you: Miss Dale or Mr Whitford.’

‘Do they?’ sung out young Crossjay.

‘Sir Willoughby does?’

‘I don’t know about spoil. I can come round him.’

‘I am sure he is very kind to you. I dare say you think Mr Whitford rather severe. You should remember he has to teach you, so that you may pass for the navy. You must not dislike him because he makes you work. Supposing you had blown yourself up to-day! You would have thought it better to have been working with Mr Whitford.’

‘Sir Willoughby says, when he’s married you won’t let me hide.’

‘Ah! It is wrong to pet a big boy like you. Does not he what you call tip you, Crossjay?’

‘Generally half-crown pieces. I’ve had a crown-piece. I’ve had sovereigns.’

‘And for that you do as he bids you? And he indulges you because you… Well, but though Mr Whitford does not give you money, he gives you his time, he tries to get you into the navy.’

‘He pays for me.’

‘What do you say?’

‘My keep. And, as for liking him, if he were at the bottom of the water here, I’d go down after him. I mean to learn. We’re both of us here at six o’clock in the morning, when it’s light, and have a swim. He taught me. Only, I never cared for schoolbooks.’

‘Are you quite certain that Mr Whitford pays for you?’

‘My father told me he did, and I must obey him. He heard my father was poor, with a family. He went

down to see my father. My father came here once, and Sir Willoughby wouldn't see him. I know Mr Whitford does. And Miss Dale told me he did. My mother says she thinks he does it to make up to us for my father's long walk in the rain and the cold he caught coming here to Patterne.'

'So you see you should not vex him, Crossjay. He is a good friend to your father and to you. You ought to love him.'

'I like him, and I like his face.'

'Why his face?'

'It's not like those faces! Miss Dale and I talk about him. She thinks that Sir Willoughby is the best-looking man ever born.'

'Were you not speaking of Mr Whitford?'

'Yes; old Vernon. That's what Sir Willoughby calls him,' young Crossjay excused himself to her look of surprise. 'Do you know what he makes me think of? – his eyes, I mean. He makes me think of Robinson Crusoe's old goat in the cavern. I like him because he's always the same, and you're not positive about some people. Miss Middleton, if you look on at cricket, in comes a safe man for ten runs. He may get more, and he never gets less; and you should hear the old farmers talk of him in the booth. That's just my feeling.'

Miss Middleton understood that some illustration from the cricketing-field was intended to throw light on the boy's feeling for Mr Whitford. Young Crossjay was evidently warming to speak from his heart. But the sun was low, she had to dress for the dinner-table, and she landed him with regret, as at a holiday over. Before they parted, he offered to swim across the lake in his clothes, or dive to the bed for anything she pleased to throw, declaring solemnly that it should not be lost.

She walked back at a slow pace, and sung to herself above her darker-flowing thoughts, like the reed-warbler on the branch beside the night-stream; a simple song of a light-hearted sound, independent of the shifting black and grey of the flood underneath.

A step was at her heels.

'I see you have been petting my scapegrace.'

'Mr Whitford! Yes; not petting, I hope. I tried to give him a lecture. He's a dear lad, but, I fancy, trying.'

She was in fine sunset colour, unable to arrest the mounting tide. She had been rowing, she said; and, as he directed his eyes, according to his wont, penetratingly, she defended herself by fixing her mind on Robinson Crusoe's old goat in the recess of the cavern.

'I must have him away from here very soon,' said Vernon. 'Here he's quite spoiled. Speak of him to Willoughby. I can't guess at his ideas of the boy's future, but the chance of passing for the navy won't bear trifling with, and if ever there was a lad made for the navy, it's Crossjay.'

The incident of the explosion in the laboratory was new to Vernon.

'And Willoughby laughed?' he said. 'There are sea-port crammers who stuff young fellows for examination, and we shall have to pack off the boy at once to the best one of the lot we can find. I would rather have had him under me up to the last three months, and have made sure of some roots to what is knocked into his head. But he's ruined here. And I am going. So I shall not trouble him for many weeks longer. Dr Middleton is well?'

'My father is well, yes. He pounced like a falcon on your notes in the library.'

Vernon came out with a chuckle.

'They were left to attract him. I am in for a controversy.'

'Papa will not spare you, to judge from his look.'

'I know the look.'

'Have you walked far to-day?'

'Nine and a half hours. My Flibbertigibbet[8] is too much for me at times, and I had to walk off my temper.'

She cast her eyes on him, thinking of the pleasure of dealing with a temper honestly coltish, and manfully open to a specific.

'All those hours were required?'

'Not quite so long.'

'You are training for your Alpine tour.'

'It's doubtful whether I shall get to the Alps this year. I leave the Hall, and shall probably be in London with a pen to sell.'

'Willoughby knows that you leave him?'

'As much as Mont Blanc knows that he is going to be climbed by a party below. He sees a speck or two in

the valley.'

'He has not spoken of it.'

'He would attribute it to changes…'

Vernon did not conclude the sentence.

She became breathless, without emotion, but checked by the barrier confronting an impulse to ask, what changes? She stooped to pluck a cowslip.

'I saw daffodils lower down the park,' she said. 'One or two; they're nearly over.'

'We are well off for wild flowers here,' he answered.

'Do not leave him, Mr Whitford.'

'He will not want me.'

'You are devoted to him.'

'I can't pretend that.'

'Then it is the changes you imagine you foresee… If any occur, why should they drive you away?'

'Well, I'm two and thirty, and have never been in the fray: a kind of nondescript, half scholar, and by nature half billman or bowman or musketeer; if I'm worth anything London's the field for me. But that's what I have to try.'

'Papa will not like your serving with your pen in London: he will say you are worth too much for that.'

'Good men are at it; I should not care to be ranked above them.'

'They are wasted, he says.'

'Error! If they have their private ambition, they may suppose they are wasted. But the value to the world of a private ambition, I do not clearly understand.'

'You have not an evil opinion of the world?' said Miss Middleton, sick at heart as she spoke, with the sensation of having invited herself to take a drop of poison.

He replied: 'One might as well have an evil opinion of a river: here it's muddy, there it's clear; one day troubled, another at rest. We have to treat it with common sense.'

'Love it?'

'In the sense of serving it.'

'Not think it beautiful?'

'Part of it is, part of it the reverse.'

'Papa would quote the "mulier formosa".'[9]

'Except that "fish" is too good for the black extremity. "Woman" is excellent for the upper.'

'How do you say that? – not cynically, I believe. Your view commends itself to my reason.'

She was grateful to him for not stating it in ideal contrast with Sir Willoughby's view. If he had, so intensely did her youthful blood desire to be enamoured of the world, that she felt he would have lifted her off her feet. For a moment a gulf beneath had been threatening. When she said, 'Love it?' a little enthusiasm would have wafted her into space fierily as wine; but the sober, 'In the sense of serving it', entered her brain, and was matter for reflection upon it and him.

She could think of him in pleasant liberty, uncorrected by her woman's instinct of peril. He had neither arts nor graces; nothing of his cousin's easy social front-face. She had once witnessed the military precision of his dancing, and had to learn to like him before she ceased to pray that she might never be the victim of it as his partner. He walked heroically, his pedestrian vigour being famous, but that means one who walks away from the sex, not excelling in the recreations where men and women join hands. He was not much of a horseman either. Sir Willoughby enjoyed seeing him on horseback. And he could scarcely be said to shine in a drawing-room, unless when seated beside a person ready for real talk. Even more than his merits, his demerits pointed him out as a man to be a friend to a young woman who wanted one. His way of life pictured to her troubled spirit an enviable smoothness; and his having achieved that smooth way she considered a sign of strength; and she wished to lean in idea upon some friendly strength. His reputation for indifference to the frivolous charms of girls clothed him with a noble coldness, and gave him the distinction of a far-seen solitary iceberg in Southern waters. The popular notion of hereditary titled aristocracy resembles her sentiment for a man that would not flatter and could not be flattered by her sex: he appeared superior almost to awfulness. She was young, but she had received much flattery in her ears, and by it she had been snared; and he, disdaining to practise the fowler's arts or to cast a thought on small fowls, appeared to her to have a pride founded on natural loftiness.

They had not spoken for awhile, when Vernon said abruptly, 'The boy's future rather depends on you,

Miss Middleton. I mean to leave as soon as possible, and I do not like his being here without me, though you will look after him, I have no doubt. But you may not at first see where the spoiling hurts him. He should be packed off at once to the crammer, before you are Lady Patterne. Use your influence. Willoughby will support the lad at your request. The cost cannot be great. There are strong grounds against my having him in London, even if I could manage it. May I count on you?'

'I will mention it: I will do my best,' said Miss Middleton, strangely dejected.

They were now on the lawn, where Sir Willoughby was walking with the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, his maiden aunts.

'You seem to have coursed the hare and captured the hart,' he said to his bride.

'Started the truant and run down the paedagogue,' said Vernon.

'Ay, you won't listen to me about the management of that boy,' Sir Willoughby retorted.

The ladies embraced Miss Middleton. One offered up an ejaculation in eulogy of her looks, the other of her healthfulness: then both remarked that with indulgence young Cross-jay could be induced to do anything. Clara wondered whether inclination or Sir Willoughby had disciplined their individuality out of them and made them his shadows, his echoes. She gazed from them to him, and feared him. But as yet she had not experienced the power in him which could threaten and wrestle to subject the members of his household to the state of satellites. Though she had in fact been giving battle to it for several months, she had held her own too well to perceive definitely the character of the spirit opposing her.

She said to the ladies, 'Ah, no! Mr Whitford has chosen the only method for teaching a boy like Crossjay.'

'I propose to make a man of him,' said Sir Willoughby.

'What is to become of him if he learns nothing?'

'If he pleases me, he will be provided for. I have never abandoned a dependent.'

Clara let her eyes rest on his and, without turning or dropping, shut them.

The effect was discomforting to him. He was very sensitive to the intentions of eyes and tones; which was one secret of his rigid grasp of the dwellers in his household. They were taught that they had to render agreement under sharp scrutiny. Studious eyes, devoid of warmth, devoid of the shyness of sex, that suddenly closed on their look, signified a want of comprehension of some kind, it might be hostility of understanding. Was it possible he did not possess her utterly? He frowned up.

Clara saw the lift of his brows, and thought, 'My mind is my own, married or not.'

It was the point in dispute.

CHAPTER 9

Clara and Laetitia Meet: They Are Compared

AN hour before the time for lessons next morning young Crossjay was on the lawn with a big bunch of wild flowers. He left them at the hall door for Miss Middleton, and vanished into bushes.

These vulgar weeds were about to be dismissed to the dust-heap by the great officials of the household; but as it happened that Miss Middleton had seen them from the window in Crossjay's hands, the discovery was made that they were indeed his presentation-bouquet, and a footman received orders to place them before her. She was very pleased. The arrangement of the flowers bore witness to fairer fingers than the boy's own in the disposition of the rings of colour, red campion and anemone, cowslip and speedwell, primroses and wood-hyacinths; and rising out of the blue was a branch bearing thick white blossom, so thick, and of so pure a whiteness, that Miss Middleton, while praising Crossjay for soliciting the aid of Miss Dale, was at a loss to name the tree.

'It is a gardener's improvement on the Vestal of the forest, the wild cherry,' said Dr Middleton, 'and in this case we may admit the gardener's claim to be valid, though I believe that, with his gift of double blossom, he has improved away the fruit. Call this the Vestal of civilization, then; he has at least done something to vindicate the beauty of the office as well as the justness of the title.'

'It is Vernon's Holy Tree the young rascal has been despoiling,' said Sir Willoughby merrily.

Miss Middleton was informed that this double-blossom wild cherry-tree was worshipped by Mr Whitford.

Sir Willoughby promised he would conduct her to it. ‘You,’ he said to her, ‘can bear the trial; few complexions can; it is to most ladies a crueller test than snow. Miss Dale, for example, becomes old lace within a dozen yards of it. I should like to place her under the tree beside you.’

‘Dear me, though; but that is investing the hamadryad with novel and terrible functions,’ exclaimed Dr Middleton.

Clara said: ‘Miss Dale could drag me into a superior Court to show me fading beside her in gifts more valuable than a complexion.’

‘She has a fine ability,’ said Vernon.

All the world knew, so Clara knew of Miss Dale’s romantic admiration of Sir Willoughby; she was curious to see Miss Dale and study the nature of a devotion that might be, within reason, imitable – for a man who could speak with such steely coldness of the poor lady he had fascinated? Well, perhaps it was good for the hearts of women to be beneath a frost; to be schooled, restrained, turned inward on their dreams. Yes, then, his coldness was desireable; it encouraged an ideal of him. It suggested and seemed to propose to Clara’s mind the divineness of separation instead of the deadly accuracy of an intimate perusal. She tried to look on him as Miss Dale might look, and while partly despising her for the dupery she envied, and more than criticizing him for the inhuman numbness of sentiment which offered up his worshipper to point a complimentary comparison, she was able to imagine a distance whence it would be possible to observe him uncritically, kindly, admiringly; as the moon a handsome mortal, for example.

In the midst of her thoughts, she surprised herself by saying: ‘I certainly was difficult to instruct. I might see things clearer if I had a fine ability. I never remember to have been perfectly pleased with my immediate lesson…’

She stopped, wondering whither her tongue was leading her; then added, to save herself, ‘And that may be why I feel for poor Crossjay.’

Mr Whitford apparently did not think it remarkable that she should have been set off gabbling of ‘a fine ability’, though the eulogistic phrase had been pronounced by him with an impressiveness to make his ear aware of an echo.

Sir Willoughby dispersed her vapourish confusion. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘I have insisted with Vernon, I don’t know how often, that you must have the lad by his affections. He won’t bear driving. It had no effect on me. Boys of spirit kick at it. I think I know boys, Clara.’

He found himself addressing eyes that regarded him as though he were a small speck, a pin’s head, in the circle of their remote contemplation. They were wide; they closed.

She opened them to gaze elsewhere.

He was very sensitive.

Even then, when knowingly wounding him, or because of it, she was trying to climb back to that altitude of the thin division of neutral ground, from which we see a lover’s faults and are above them, pure surveyors. She climbed unsuccessfully, it is true; soon despairing and using the effort as a pretext to fall back lower.

Dr Middleton withdrew Sir Willoughby’s attention from the imperceptible annoyance. ‘No, sir, no: the birch! the birch! Boys of spirit commonly turn into solid men, and the solider the men the more surely do they vote for Busby.[10] For me, I pray he may be immortal in Great Britain. Sea-air nor mountain-air is half so bracing. I venture to say that the power to take a licking is better worth having than the power to administer one. Horse him and birch him if Crossjay runs from his books.’

‘It is your opinion, sir?’ his host bowed to him affably, shocked on behalf of the ladies.

‘So positively so, sir, that I will undertake, without knowledge of their antecedents, to lay my finger on the men in public life who have not had early Busby. They are ill-balanced men. Their seat of reason is not a concrete. They won’t take rough and smooth as they come. They make bad blood, can’t forgive, sniff right and left for approbation, and are excited to anger if an East wind does not flatter them. Why, sir, when they have grown to be seniors, you find these men mixed up with the nonsense of their youth; you see they are unthrashed. We English beat the world because we take a licking well. I hold it for a surety of a proper sweetness of blood.’

The smile of Sir Willoughby waxed ever softer as the shakes of his head increased in contradictoriness. ‘And yet,’ said he, with the air of conceding a little after having answered the Rev. Doctor and convicted him of error, ‘Jack requires it to keep him in order. On board ship your argument may apply. Not, I suspect, among gentlemen. No.’

‘Good-night to you, gentlemen!’ said Dr Middleton.

Clara heard Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel interchange remarks:

‘Willoughby would not have suffered it!’

‘It would entirely have altered him!’

She sighed and put a tooth on her under-lip. The gift of humourous fancy is in women fenced round with forbidding placards; they have to choke it; if they perceive a piece of humour, for instance, the young Willoughby grasped by his master, and his horrified relatives rigid at the sight of preparations for the seed of sacrilege, they have to blindfold the mind’s eye. They are society’s hard-drilled soldiery. Prussians that must both march and think in step. It is for the advantage of the civilized world, if you like, since men have decreed it, or matrons have so read the decree; but here and there a younger woman, haply an uncorrected insurgent of the sex matured here and there, feels that her lot was cast with her head in a narrower pit than her limbs.

Clara speculated as to whether Miss Dale might be perchance a person of a certain liberty of mind. She asked for some little, only some little, free play of mind in a house that seemed to wear, as it were, a cap of iron. Sir Willoughby not merely ruled, he throned, he inspired: and how? She had noticed an irascible sensitiveness in him alert against a shadow of disagreement; and as he was kind when perfectly appeased, the sop was offered by him for submission. She noticed that even Mr Whitford forbore to alarm the sentiment of authority in his cousin. If he did not breathe Sir Willoughby, like the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, he would either acquiesce in a syllable or be silent. He never strongly dissented. The habit of the house, with its iron cap, was on him, as it was on the servants, and would be, oh, shudders of the shipwrecked that see their end in drowning! on the wife.

‘When do I meet Miss Dale?’ she inquired.

‘This very evening, at dinner,’ replied Sir Willoughby.

Then, thought she, there is that to look forward to.

She indulged her morbid fit, and shut up her senses that she might live in the anticipation of meeting Miss Dale; and, long before the approach of the hour, her hope of encountering any other than another dull adherent of Sir Willoughby had fled. So she was languid for two of the three minutes when she sat alone with Laetitia in the drawing-room before the rest had assembled.

‘It is Miss Middleton?’ Laetitia said, advancing to her. ‘My jealousy tells me; for you have won my boy Crossjay’s heart, and done more to bring him to obedience in a few minutes than we have been able to do in months.’

‘His wild flowers were so welcome to me,’ said Clara.

‘He was very modest over them. And I mention it because boys of his age usually thrust their gifts in our faces fresh as they pluck them, and you were to be treated quite differently.’

‘We saw his good fairy’s hand.’

‘She resigns her office; but I pray you not to love him too well in return; for he ought to be away reading with one of those men who get boys through their examinations. He is, we all think, a born sailor, and his place is in the navy.’

‘But, Miss Dale, I love him so well that I shall consult his interests and not my own selfishness. And, if I have influence, he will not be a week with you longer. It should have been spoke of to-day; I must have been in some dream; I thought of it, I know. I will not forget to do what may be in my power.’

Clara’s heart sank at the renewed engagement and plighting of herself involved in her asking a favour, urging any sort of petition. The cause was good. Besides, she was plighted already.

‘Sir Willoughby is really fond of the boy,’ she said.

‘He is fond of exciting fondness in the boy,’ said Miss Dale. ‘He has not dealt much with children. I am sure he likes Crossjay; he could not otherwise be so forbearing; it is wonderful what he endures and laughs at.’

Sir Willoughby entered. The presence of Miss Dale illuminated him as the burning taper lights up consecrated plate. Deeply respecting her for her constancy, esteeming her for a model of taste, he was never in her society without that happy consciousness of shining which calls forth the treasures of the man; and these it is no exaggeration to term unbounded, when all that comes from him is taken for gold.

The effect of the evening on Clara was to render her distrustful of her later antagonism. She had unknowingly passed into the spirit of Miss Dale, Sir Willoughby aiding; for she could sympathize with the view of his constant admirer on seeing him so cordially and smoothly gay; as one may say, domestically witty, the most agreeable form of wit. Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson discerned that he had a leg of physical perfection; Miss Dale distinguished it in him in the vital essence; and before either of these ladies he was not simply a radiant, he was a productive creature, so true it is that praise is our fructifying sun. He had even a touch of the romantic air which Clara remembered as her first impression of the favourite of the

county; and strange she found it to observe this resuscitated idea confronting her experience. What if she had been captious, inconsiderate? Oh, blissful revival of the sense

of peace! The happiness of pain departing was all that she looked for, and her conception of liberty was to learn to love her chains, provided that he would spare her the caress. In this mood she sternly condemned Constantia. ‘We must try to do good; we must not be thinking of ourselves; we must make the best of our path in life.’ She revolved these infantile precepts with humble earnestness; and not to be tardy in her striving to do good, with a remote but pleasurable glimpse of Mr Whitford hearing of it, she took the opportunity to speak to Sir Willoughby on the subject of young Crossjay, at a moment when, alighting from horseback, he had shown himself to advantage among a gallant cantering company. He showed to great advantage on horseback among men, being invariably the best mounted, and he had a cavalierly style, possibly cultivated, but effective. On foot his raised head and

half-dropped eyelids too palpably assumed superiority. ‘Willoughby, I want to speak,’ she said, and shrank as she spoke, lest he should immediately grant everything in the mood of courtship, and invade her respite; ‘I want to speak of that dear boy Crossjay. You are fond of him. He is rather an idle boy here, and wasting time…’

‘Now you are here, and when you are here for good, my love for good…’ he fluttered away in loverliness, forgetful of Crossjay, whom he presently took up. ‘The boy recognizes his most sovereign lady, and will do your bidding, though you should order him to learn his lessons! Who would not obey? Your beauty alone commands. But what is there beyond? – a grace, a hue divine, that sets you not so much above as apart, severed from the world.’

Clara produced an active smile in duty, and pursued: ‘If Crossjay were sent at once to some house where men prepare boys to pass for the navy, he would have his chance, and the navy is distinctly his profession. His father is a brave man, and he inherits bravery, and he has a passion for a sailor’s life; only he must be able to pass his examination, and he has not much time.’

Sir Willoughby gave a slight laugh in sad amusement.

‘My dear Clara, you adore the world; and I suppose you have to learn that there is not a question in this wrangling world about which we have not disputes and contests ad nauseam. I have my notions concerning Crossjay, Vernon has his. I should wish to make a gentleman of him. Vernon marks him for a sailor. But Vernon is the lad’s protector, I am not. Vernon took him from his father to instruct him, and he has a right to say what shall be done with him. I do not interfere. Only I can’t prevent the lad from liking me. Old Vernon seems to feel it. I assure you I hold entirely aloof. If I am asked, in spite of my disapproval of Vernon’s plans for the boy, to subscribe to his departure, I can but shrug, because, as you see, I have never opposed. Old Vernon pays for him, he is the master, he decides, and if Crossjay is blown from the masthead in a gale, the blame does not fall on me. These, my dear, are matters of reason.’

‘I would not venture to intrude on them,’ said Clara, ‘if I had not suspected that money…’

‘Yes,’ cried Willoughby; ‘and it is a part. And let old Vernon surrender the boy to me, I will immediately relieve him of the burden on his purse. Can I do that, my dear, for the furtherance of a scheme I condemn? The point is thus: latterly I have invited Captain Patterne to visit me: just previous to his departure for the African Coast, where Government despatches Marines when there is no other way of killing them, I sent him a special invitation. He thanked me and curtly declined. The man, I may almost say, is my pensioner. Well, he calls himself a Patterne, he is undoubtedly a man of courage, he has elements of our blood, and the name. I think I am to be approved for desiring to make a better gentleman of the son than I behold in the father: and seeing that life from an early age on board ship has anything but made a gentleman of the father, I hold that I am right in shaping another course for the son.’

‘Naval officers…’ Clara suggested.

‘Some,’ said Willoughby. ‘But they must be men of birth, coming out of homes of good breeding. Strip them of the halo of the title of naval officers, and I fear you would not often say gentlemen when they step into a drawing-room. I went so far as to fancy I had some claim to make young Crossjay something different. It can be done; the Patterne comes out in his behaviour to you, my love; it can be done. But if I take him, I claim undisputed sway over him. I cannot make a gentleman of the fellow if I am to compete with this person and that. In fine, he must look up to me, he must have one model.’

‘Would you, then, provide for him subsequently?’

‘According to his behaviour.’

‘Would not that be precarious for him?’

‘More so than the profession you appear inclined to choose for him?’

‘But there he would be under clear regulations.’

‘With me he would have to respond to affection.’

‘Would you secure to him a settled income? For an idle gentleman is bad enough; a penniless gentleman…’

‘He has only to please me, my dear, and he will be launched and protected.’

‘But if he does not succeed in pleasing you?’

‘Is it so difficult?’

‘Oh!’ Clara fretted.

‘You see, my love, I answer you,’ said Sir Willoughby.

He resumed: ‘But let old Vernon have his trial with the lad. He has his own ideas. Let him carry them out. I shall watch the experiment.’

Clara was for abandoning her task in sheer faintness.

‘Is not the question one of money?’ she said, shyly, knowing Mr Whitford to be poor.

‘Old Vernon chooses to spend his money that way,’ replied Sir Willoughby. ‘If it saves him from breaking his shins and risking his neck on his Alps, we may consider it well employed.’

‘Yes,’ Clara’s voice occupied a pause.

She seized her languor as it were a curling snake and cast it off. ‘But I understand that Mr Whitford wants your assistance. Is he not – not rich? When he leaves the Hall to try his fortune in literature in London, he may not be so well able to support Crossjay and obtain the instruction necessary for the boy: and it would be generous to help him.’

‘Leaves the Hall!’ exclaimed Willoughby. ‘I have not heard a word of it. He made a bad start at the beginning, and I should have thought that would have tamed him: had to throw over his Fellowship; ahem! Then he received a small legacy some time back, and wanted to be off to push his luck in literature: rank gambling, as I told him. Londonizing can do him no good. I thought that nonsense of his was over years ago. What is it he has from me? – about a hundred and fifty a year: and it might be doubled for the asking: and all the books he requires: and these writers and scholars no sooner think of a book than they must have it. And do not suppose me to complain. I am a man who will not have a single shilling expended by those who serve immediately about my person. I confess to exacting that kind of dependency. Feudalism is not an objectionable thing if you can be sure of the lord. You know, Clara, and you should know me in my weakness too, I do not claim servitude, I stipulate for affection. I claim to be surrounded by persons loving me. And with one?… dearest! So that we two can shut out the world; we live what is the dream of others. Nothing imaginable can be sweeter. It is a veritable heaven on earth. To be the possessor of the whole of you! Your thoughts, hopes, all.’

Sir Willoughby intensified his imagination to conceive more: he could not, or could not express it, and pursued: ‘But what is this talk of Vernon’s leaving me? He cannot leave. He has barely a hundred a year of his own. You see, I consider him. I do not speak of the ingratitude of the wish to leave. You know, my dear, I have a deadly abhorrence of partings and such like. As far as I can, I surround myself with healthy people specially to guard myself from having my feelings wrung; and excepting Miss Dale, whom you like – my darling does like her?’ – the answer satisfied him; ‘with that one exception, I am not aware of a case that threatens to torment me. And here is a man, under no compulsion, talking of leaving the Hall! In the name of goodness, why? But why? Am I to imagine that the sight of perfect felicity distresses him? We are told that the world is “desperately wicked”. I do not like to think it of my friends; yet otherwise their conduct is often hard to account for.’

‘If it were true, you would not punish Crossjay?’ Clara feebly interposed.

‘I should certainly take Crossjay and make a man of him after my own model, my dear. But who spoke to you of this?’

‘Mr Whitford himself. And let me give you my opinion, Willoughby, that he will take Crossjay with him rather than leave him, if there is a fear of the boy’s missing his chance of the navy.’

‘Marines appear to be in the ascendant,’ said Sir Willoughby, astonished at the locution and pleading in the interests of a son of one. ‘Then Crossjay he must take. I cannot accept half the boy. I am,’ he laughed, ‘the legitimate claimant in the application for judgement before the wise king.[11] Besides, the boy has a dose of my blood in him; he has none of Vernon’s, not one drop.’

‘Ah!’

‘You see, my love?’

‘Oh, I do see; yes.’

‘I put forth no pretensions to perfection,’ Sir Willoughby continued. ‘I can bear a considerable amount of

provocation; still I can be offended, and I am unforgiving when I have been offended. Speak to Vernon, if a natural occasion should spring up. I shall, of course, have to speak to him. You may, Clara, have observed a man who passed me on the road as we were cantering home, without a hint of a touch to his hat. That man is a tenant of mine, farming six hundred acres, Hoppner by name: a man bound to remember that I have, independently of my position, obliged him frequently. His lease of my ground has five years to run. I must say I detest the churlishness of our country population, and where it comes across me I chastise it. Vernon is a different matter: he will only require to be spoken to. One would fancy the old fellow laboured now and then under a magnetic attraction to beggary. My love,' he bent to her and checked their pacing up and down, 'you are tired?'

'I am very tired to-day,' said Clara.

His arm was offered. She laid two fingers on it, and they dropped when he attempted to press them to his rib.

He did not insist. To walk beside her was to share in the stateliness of her walking.

He placed himself at a corner of the door-way for her to pass him into the house, and doated on her cheek, her ear, and the softly dusky nape of her neck, where this way and that the little lighter-coloured irreclaimable curls running truant from the comb and the knot – curls, half-curls, root-curls, vine-ringlets, wedding-rings, fledgling feathers, tufts of down, blown wisps – waved or fell, waved over or up or involutedly, or strayed, loose and downward, in the form of small silken paws, hardly any of them much thicker than a crayon shading, cunninger than long round locks of gold to trick the heart.

Laetitia had nothing to show resembling such beauty.

CHAPTER 10

In Which Sir Willoughby Chances to Supply the Title for Himself

NOW Vernon was useful to his cousin; he was the accomplished secretary of a man who governed his estate shrewdly and diligently, but had been once or twice unlucky in his judgements pronounced from the magisterial bench as a Justice of the Peace, on which occasions a half column of trenchant English supported by an apposite classical quotation impressed Sir Willoughby with the value of such a secretary in a controversy. He had no fear of that fiery dragon of scorching breath – the newspaper press – while Vernon was his right-hand man; and as he intended to enter Parliament, he foresaw the greater need of him. Furthermore, he liked his cousin to date his own controversial writings, on classical subjects, from Patterne Hall. It caused his house to shine in a foreign field; proved the service of scholarship by giving it a flavour of a bookish aristocracy that, though not so well worth having, and indeed in itself contemptible, is above the material andtitular; one cannot quite say how. There, however, is the flavour. Dainty sauces are the life, the nobility, of famous dishes; taken alone, the former would be nauseating, the latter plebeian. It is thus, or somewhat so, when you have a poet, still better a scholar, attached to your household. Sir Willoughby deserved to have him, for he was above his county friends in his apprehension of the flavour bestowed by the man; and having him, he had made them conscious of their deficiency. His cook, M. Dehors, pupil of the great Godefroy, was not the only French cook in the county; but his cousin and secretary, the rising scholar, the elegant essayist, was an unparalleled decoration; of his kind, of course. Personally, we laugh at him; you had better not, unless you are fain to show that the higher world of polite literature is unknown to you. Sir Willoughby could create an abject silence at a county dinner-table by an allusion to Vernon 'at work at home upon his Etruscans or his Dorians'; and he paused a moment to let the allusion sink, laughed audibly to himself over his eccentric cousin, and let him rest.

In addition, Sir Willoughby abhorred the loss of a familiar face in his domestic circle. He thought ill of servants who could accept their dismissal without petitioning to stay with him. A servant that gave warning partook of a certain fiendishness. Vernon's project of leaving the Hall offended and alarmed the sensitive gentleman. 'I shall have to hand Letty Dale to him at last!' he thought, yielding in bitter generosity to the conditions imposed on him by the ungenerousness of another. For, since his engagement to Miss Middleton, his electrically forethoughtful mind had seen in Miss Dale, if she stayed in the neighbourhood, and remained unmarried, the governess of his infant children, often consulting with him. But here was a prospect dashed out. The two, then, may marry, and live in a cottage on the borders of his park; and

Vernon can retain his post, and Laetitia her devotion. The risk of her casting it off had to be faced. Marriage has been known to have such an effect on the most faithful of women that a great passion fades to naught in their volatile bosoms when they have taken a husband. We see in women especially the triumph of the animal over the spiritual. Nevertheless, risks must be run for a purpose in view.

Having no taste for a discussion with Vernon, whom it was his habit to confound by breaking away from him abruptly when he had delivered his opinion, he left it to both the persons interesting themselves in young Crossjay to imagine that he was meditating on the question of the lad, and to imagine that it would be wise to leave him to meditate; for he could be preternaturally acute in reading any of his fellow-creatures if they crossed the current of his feelings. And, meanwhile, he instructed the ladies Eleanor and Isabel to bring Laetitia Dale on a visit to the Hall, where dinner-parties were soon to be given and a pleasing talker would be wanted, where also a woman of intellect, steeped in a splendid sentiment, hitherto a miracle of female constancy, might stir a younger woman to some emulation. Definitely to resolve to bestow Laetitia upon Vernon was more than he could do; enough that he held the card.

Regarding Clara, his genius for perusing the heart which was not in perfect harmony with him through the series of responsive movements to his own, informed him of a something in her character that might have suggested to Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson her indefensible, absurd ‘rogue in porcelain’. Idea there was none in that phrase; yet, if you looked on Clara as a delicately inimitable porcelain beauty, the suspicion of a delicately inimitable ripple over her features touched a thought of innocent roguery, wildwood roguery; the likeness to the costly and lovely substance appeared to admit a fitness in the dubious epithet. He detested but was haunted by the phrase.

She certainly had at times the look of the nymph that has gazed too long on the faun, and has unwittingly copied his lurking lip and long sliding eye. Her play with young Crossjay resembled a return of the lady to the cat; she flung herself into it as if her real vitality had been in suspense till she saw the boy. Sir Willoughby by no means disapproved of a physical liveliness that promised him health in his mate; but he began to feel in their conversations that she did not sufficiently think of making herself a nest for him. Steely points were opposed to him when he, figuratively, bared his bosom to be taken to the softest and fairest. She reasoned: in other words, armed her ignorance. She reasoned against him publicly, and lured Vernon to support her. Influence is to be counted for power, and her influence over Vernon was displayed in her persuading him to dance one evening at Lady Culmer’s, after his melancholy exhibitions of himself in the art; and not only did she persuade him to stand up fronting her, she manoeuvred him through the dance like a clever boy cajoling a top to come to him without reeling, both to Vernon’s contentment and to Sir Willoughby’s; for he was the last man to object to a manifestation of power in his bride. Considering her influence with Vernon, he renewed the discourse upon young Crossjay; and, as he was addicted to system, he took her into his confidence, that she might be taught to look to him and act for him.

‘Old Vernon has not spoken to you again of that lad?’ he said.

‘Yes, Mr Whitford has asked me.’

‘He does not ask me, my dear!’

‘He may fancy me of greater aid than I am.’

‘You see, my love, if he puts Crossjay on me, he will be off. He has this craze for “enlisting” his pen in London, as he calls it; and I am accustomed to him; I don’t like to think of him as a hack scribe, writing nonsense from dictation to earn a pitiful subsistence; I want him here; and, supposing he goes, he offends me; he loses a friend; and it will not be the first time that a friend has tried me too far; but if he offends me, he is extinct.’

‘Is what?’ cried Clara, with a look of fright.

‘He becomes to me at once as if he had never been. He is extinct.’

‘In spite of your affection?’

‘On account of it, I might say. Our nature is mysterious, and mine as much so as any. Whatever my regrets, he goes out. This is not a language I talk to the world. I do the man no harm; I am not to be named unchristian. But…!’

Sir Willoughby mildly shrugged, and indicated a spreading out of the arms.

‘But do, do talk to me as you talk to the world, Willoughby; give me some relief!’

‘My own Clara, we are one. You should know me at my worst, we will say, if you like, as well as at my best.’

‘Should I speak too?’

‘What could you have to confess?’

She hung silent; the wave of an insane resolution swelled in her bosom and subsided before she said,

‘Cowardice, incapacity to speak.’

‘Women!’ said he.

We do not expect so much of women; the heroic virtues as little as the vices. They have not to unfold the scroll of character.

He resumed, and by his tone she understood that she was now in the inner temple of him: ‘I tell you these things; I quite acknowledge they do not elevate me. They help to constitute my character. I tell you most humbly that I have in me much – too much of the fallen archangel’s pride.’

Clara bowed her head over a sustained in-drawn breath.

‘It must be pride,’ he said, in a reverie superinduced by her thoughtfulness over the revelation, and glorying in the black flames demoniacal wherewith he crowned himself.

‘Can you not correct it?’ said she.

He replied, profoundly vexed by disappointment: ‘I am what I am. It might be demonstrated to you mathematically that it is corrected by equivalents or substitutions in my character. If it be a failing – assuming that.’

‘It seems one to me: so cruelly to punish Mr Whitford for seeking to improve his fortunes.’

‘He reflects on my share in his fortunes. He has had but to apply to me for his honorarium to be doubled.’

‘He wishes for independence.’

‘Independence of *me*!’

‘Liberty!’

‘At my expense!’

‘Oh, Willoughby!’

‘Ay, but this is the world, and I know it, my love; and beautiful as your incredulity may be, you will find it more comforting to confide in my knowledge of the selfishness of the world. My sweetest, you will? – you do! For a breath of difference between us is intolerable. Do you not feel how it breaks our magic ring? One small fissure, and we have the world with its muddy deluge! – But my subject was old Vernon. Yes, I pay for Crossjay, if Vernon consents to stay. I waive my own scheme for the lad, though I think it the better one. Now, then, to induce Vernon to stay. He has his ideas about staying under a mistress of the household; and therefore, not to contest it – he is a man of no argument; a sort of lunatic determination takes the place of it with old Vernon! – let him settle close by me, in one of my cottages; very well, and to settle him we must marry him.’

‘Who is there?’ said Clara, beating for the lady in her mind.

‘Women,’ said Willoughby, ‘are born match-makers, and the most persuasive is a young bride. With a man – and a man like old Vernon! – she is irresistible. It is my wish, and that arms you. It is your wish, that subjugates him. If he goes, he goes for good. If he stays, he is my friend. I deal simply with him, as with every one. It is the secret of authority. Now Miss Dale will soon lose her father. He exists on a pension; she has the prospect of having to leave the neighbourhood of the Hall, unless she is established near us. Her whole heart is in this region; it is the poor soul’s passion. Count on her agreeing. But she will require a little wooing: and old Vernon wooing! Picture the scene to yourself, my love. His notion of wooing, I suspect, will be to treat the lady like a lexicon, and turn over the leaves for the word, and fly through the leaves for another word, and so get a sentence. Don’t frown at the poor old fellow, my Clara; some have the language on their tongues, and some have not. Some are very dry sticks; manly men, honest fellows, but so cut away, so polished away from the sex, that they are in absolute want of outsiders to supply the silken filaments to attach them. Actually!’ Sir Willoughby laughed in Clara’s face to relax the dreamy stoniness of her look. ‘But I can assure you, my dearest, I have seen it. Vernon does not know how to speak – as *we* speak. He has, or he had, what is called a sneaking affection for Miss Dale. It was the most amusing thing possible; his courtship! – the air of a dog with an uneasy conscience, trying to reconcile himself with his master! We were all in fits of laughter. Of course it came to nothing.’

‘Will Mr Whitford,’ said Clara, ‘offend you to extinction if he declines?’

Willoughby breathed an affectionate ‘Tush!’ to her silliness.

‘We bring them together, as we best can. You see, Clara, I desire, and I will make some sacrifices to detain him.’

‘But what do you sacrifice? – a cottage?’ said Clara, combative at all points.

‘An ideal, perhaps. I lay no stress on sacrifice. I strongly object to separations. And therefore, you will say, I prepare the ground for unions? Put your influence to good service, my love. I believe you could persuade him to give us the Highland fling on the drawing-room table.’

‘There is nothing to say to him of Crossjay?’

‘We hold Crossjay in reserve.’

‘It is urgent.’

‘Trust me. I have my ideas. I am not idle. That boy bids fair for a capital horseman. Eventualities might…’ Sir Willoughby murmured to himself, and addressing his bride, ‘The cavalry? If we put him into the cavalry, we might make a gentleman of him – not be ashamed of him. Or, under certain eventualities, the Guards. Think it over, my love. De Craye, who will, I suppose, act best man for me, supposing old Vernon to pull at the collar, is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Guards, a thorough gentleman – of the brainless class, if you like, but an elegant fellow; an Irishman; you will see him, and I should like to set a naval lieutenant beside him in a drawing-room, for you to compare them and consider the model you would choose for a boy you are interested in. Horace is grace and gallantry incarnate; fatuous, probably: I have always been too friendly with him to examine closely. He made himself one of my dogs, though my elder, and seemed to like to be at my heels. One of the few men’s faces I can call admirably handsome; – with nothing behind it, perhaps. As Vernon says, “a nothing picked by the vultures and bleached by the desert”. Not a bad talker, if you are satisfied with keeping up the ball. He will amuse you. Old Horace does not know how amusing he is!’

‘Did Mr Whitford say that of Colonel De Craye?’

‘I forget the person of whom he said it. So you have noticed old Vernon’s foible? Quote him one of his epigrams, and he is in motion head and heels! It is an infallible receipt for tuning him. If I want to have him in good temper, I have only to remark, “as you said”. I straighten his back instantly.’

‘I,’ said Clara, ‘have noticed chiefly his anxiety concerning the boy; for which I admire him.’

‘Creditable, if not particularly far-sighted and sagacious. Well, then, my dear, attack him at once; lead him to the subject of our fair neighbour. She is to be our guest for a week or so, and the whole affair might be concluded far enough to fix him before she leaves. She is at present awaiting the arrival of a cousin to attend on her father. A little gentle pushing will precipitate old Vernon on his knees as far as he ever can unbend them; but when a lady is made ready to expect a declaration, you know, why, she does not – does she? – demand the entire formula? – though some beautiful fortresses…’

He enfolded her. Clara was growing hardened to it. To this she was fated; and not seeing any way to escape, she invoked a friendly frost to strike her blood, and passed through the minute unfeelingly. Having passed it, she reproached herself for making so much of it, thinking it a lesser endurance than to listen to him. What could she do? – she was caged; by her word of honour, as she at one time thought; by her cowardice, at another; and dimly sensible that the latter was a stronger lock than the former, she mused on the abstract question whether a woman’s cowardice can be so absolute as to cast her into the jaws of her aversion. Is it to be conceived? Is there not a moment when it stands at bay? But haggard-visaged Honour then starts up claiming to be dealt with in turn; for having courage restored to her, she must have the courage to break with honour, she must dare to be faithless, and not merely say, I will be brave, but be brave enough to be dishonourable. The cage of a plighted woman hungering for her disengagement has two keepers, a noble and a vile; where on earth is creature so dreadfully enclosed? It lies with her to overcome what degrades her, that she may win to liberty by overcoming what exalts.

Contemplating her situation, this idea (or vapour of youth taking the god-like semblance of an idea) sprang, born of her present sickness, in Clara’s mind; that it must be an ill-constructed tumbling world where the hour of ignorance is made the creator of our destiny by being forced to the decisive elections upon which life’s main issues hang. Her teacher had brought her to contemplate his view of the world.

She thought likewise: how must a man despise women, who can expose himself as he does to me!

Miss Middleton owed it to Sir Willoughby Patterne that she ceased to think like a girl. When had the great change begun? Glancing back, she could imagine that it was near the period we call in love the first – almost from the first. And she was led to imagine it through having become barred from imagining her own emotions of that season. They were so dead as not to arise even under the form of shadows in fancy. Without imputing blame to him, for she was reasonable so far, she deemed herself a person entrapped. In a dream somehow she had committed herself to a life-long imprisonment; and, oh terror! not in a quiet dungeon; the barren walls closed round her, talked, called for ardour, expected admiration.

She was unable to say why she could not give it; why she retreated more and more inwardly; why she invoked the frost to kill her tenderest feelings. She was in revolt, until a whisper of the day of bells reduced her to blank submission; out of which a breath of peace drew her to revolt again in gradual rapid stages, and once more the aspect of that singular day of merry blackness felled her to earth. It was alive, it advanced, it had a mouth, it had a song. She received letters of bridesmaids writing of it, and felt them as waves that hurl a log of wreck to shore. Following which afflicting sense of antagonism to the whole circle

sweeping on with her, she considered the possibility of her being in a commencement of madness. Otherwise might she not be accused of a capriciousness quite as deplorable to consider? She had written to certain of these young ladies not very long since of this gentleman – how? – in what tone? And was it her madness then? – her recovery now? It seemed to her that to have written of him enthusiastically resembled madness more than to shudder away from the union; but standing alone, opposing all she has consented to set in motion, is too strange to a girl for perfect justification to be found in reason when she seeks it.

Sir Willoughby was destined himself to supply her with that key of special insight which revealed and stamped him in a title to fortify her spirit of revolt, consecrate it almost.

The popular physician of the county and famous anecdotal wit, Dr Corney, had been a guest at dinner overnight, and the next day there was talk of him, and of the resources of his art displayed by Armand Dehors on his hearing that he was to minister to the tastes of a gathering of hommes d'esprit. Sir Willoughby glanced at Dehors with his customary benevolent

irony in speaking of the persons, great in their way, who served him. 'Why he cannot give us daily so good a dinner, one must, I suppose, go to French nature to learn. The French are in the habit of making up for all their deficiencies with enthusiasm. They have no reverence; if I had said to him, "I want something particularly excellent, Dehors", I should have had a commonplace dinner. But they have enthusiasm on draught, and that is what we must pull at. Know one Frenchman and you know France. I have had Dehors under my eye two years, and I can mount his enthusiasm at a word. He took hommes d'esprit to denote men of letters. Frenchmen have destroyed their nobility, so, for the sake of excitement, they put up the literary man – not to worship him; that they can't do; it's to put themselves in a state of effervescence.

They will not have real greatness above them, so they have sham. That they may justly call it equality, perhaps! Ay, for all your shake of the head, my good Vernon! You see, human nature comes round again, try as we may to upset it, and the French only differ from us in wading through blood to discover that they are at their old trick once more; "I am your equal, sir, your born equal. Oh! you are a man of letters? Allow me to be in a bubble about you." Yes, Vernon, and I believe the fellow looks up to you as the head of the establishment. I am not jealous. Provided he attends to his functions! There's a French philosopher [12] who's for naming the days of the year after the birthdays of French men of letters. Voltaire-day, Rousseau-day, Racine-day, so on. Perhaps Vernon will inform us who takes April 1st'

'A few trifling errors are of no consequence when you are in the vein of satire,' said Vernon. 'Be satisfied with knowing a nation in the person of a cook.'

'They may be reading us English off in a jockey!' said Dr Middleton. 'I believe that jockeys are the exchange we make for cooks; and our neighbours do not get the best of the bargain.'

'No; but, my dear good Vernon, it's nonsensical,' said Sir Willoughby; 'why be bawling every day the names of men of letters?'

'Philosophers.'

'Well, philosophers.'

'Of all countries and times. And they are the benefactors of humanity.'

'Bene – !' Sir Willoughby's derisive laugh broke the word. 'There's a pretension in all that, irreconcilable with English sound sense. Surely you see it?'

'We might,' said Vernon, 'if you like, give alternative titles to the days, or have alternating days, devoted to our great families that performed meritorious deeds upon such a day.'

The rebel Clara, delighting in his banter, was heard: 'Can we furnish sufficient?'

'A poet or two could help us.'

'Perhaps a statesman,' she suggested.

'A pugilist, if wanted.'

'For blowy days,' observed Dr Middleton, and hastily in penitence picked up the conversation he had unintentionally prostrated, with a general remark on new-fangled notions, and a word aside to Vernon; which created the blissful suspicion in Clara that her father was indisposed to second Sir Willoughby's opinions even when sharing them.

Sir Willoughby had led the conversation. Displeased that the lead should be withdrawn from him, he turned to Clara and related one of the after-dinner anecdotes of Dr Corney; and another, with a vast deal of human nature in it, concerning a valetudinarian gentleman, whose wife chanced to be desperately ill, and he went to the physicians assembled in consultation outside the sick-room, imploring them by all he valued, and in tears, to save the poor patient for him, saying: 'She is everything to me, everything; and if she dies I am compelled to run the risks of marrying again; I must marry again; for she has accustomed me so to the little attentions of a wife, that in truth I can't, I can't lose her! She must be saved!' And the loving husband

of any devoted wife wrung his hands.

'Now, there, Clara, there you have the Egoist,' added Sir Willoughby. 'That is the perfect Egoist. You see what he comes to – and his wife! The man was utterly unconscious of giving vent to the grossest selfishness.'

'An Egoist!' said Clara.

'Beware of marrying an Egoist, my dear!' He bowed gallantly; and so blindly fatuous did he appear to her, that she could hardly believe him guilty of uttering the words she had heard from him, and kept her eyes on him vacantly till she came to a sudden full stop in the thoughts directing her gaze. She looked at Vernon, she looked at her father, and at the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. None of them saw the man in the word, none noticed the word; yet this word was her medical herb, her illuminating lamp, the key of him (and, alas, but she thought it by feeling her need of one), the advocate pleading in apology for her. Egoist! She beheld him – unfortunate, self-designated man that he was! – in his good qualities as well as bad under the implacable lamp, and his good were drenched in his first person singular. His generosity roared of *I* louder than the rest. Conceive him at the age of Dr Corney's hero: 'Pray, save my wife for me. I shall positively have to get another if I lose her, and one who may not love me half so well, or understand the peculiarities of my character and appreciate my attitudes.' He was in his thirty-second year, therefore a young man, strong and healthy, yet his garrulous return to his principal theme, his emphasis on I and me, lent him the seeming of an old man spotted with decaying youth.

'Beware of marrying an Egoist.'

Would he help her to escape? The idea of the scene ensuing upon her petition for release, and the being dragged round the walls of his egoism, and having her head knocked against the corners, alarmed her with sensations of sickness.

There was the example of Constantia. But that desperate young lady had been assisted by a gallant, loving gentleman; she had met a Captain Oxford.

Clara brooded on those two until they seemed heroic. She questioned herself. Could she –? were one to come? She shut her eyes in languor, leaning the wrong way of her wishes, yet unable to say No.

Sir Willoughby had positively said beware! Marrying him would be a deed committed in spite of his express warning. She went so far as to conceive him subsequently saying: 'I warned you.' She conceived the state of marriage with him as that of a woman tied not to a man of heart, but to an obelisk lettered all over with hieroglyphics, and everlastingly hearing him expound them, relishing renewing his lectures on them.

Full surely this immovable stone-man would not release her. This petrifaction of egoism would from amazedly to austerely refuse the petition. His pride would debar him from understanding her desire to be released. And if she resolved on it, without doing it straightway in Constantia's manner, the miserable bewilderment of her father, for whom such a complication would be a tragic dilemma, had to be thought of. Her father, with all his tenderness for his child, would make a stand on the point of honour; though certain to yield to her, he would be distressed in a tempest of worry; and Dr Middleton thus afflicted threw up his arms, he shunned books, shunned speech, and resembled a castaway on the ocean, with nothing between himself and his calamity. As for the world, it would be barking at her heels. She might call the man she wrenched her hand from, Egoist; jilt, the world would call her. She dwelt bitterly on her agreement with Sir Willoughby regarding the world, laying it to his charge that her garden had become a place of nettles, her horizon an unlighted fourth side of a square.

Clara passed from person to person visiting the Hall. There was universal, and as she was compelled to see, honest admiration of the host. Not a soul had a suspicion of his cloaked nature. Her agony of hypocrisy in accepting their compliments as the bride of Sir Willoughby Patterne was poorly moderated by contempt of them for their infatuation. She tried to cheat herself with the thought that they were right and that she was the foolish and wicked inconstant. In her anxiety to strangle the rebelliousness which had been communicated from her mind to her blood, and was present with her whether her mind was in action or not, she encouraged the ladies Eleanor and Isabel to magnify the fictitious man of their idolatry, hoping that she might enter into them imaginatively, that she might to some degree subdue herself to the necessity of her position. If she partly succeeded in stupefying her antagonism, five minutes of him undid the work.

He requested her to wear the Patterne pearls for a dinner-party of grand ladies, telling her that he would commission Miss Isabel to take them to her. Clara begged leave to decline them, on the plea of having no right to wear them. He laughed at her modish modesty. 'But really it might almost be classed with affection,' said he. 'I give you the right. Virtually you are my wife.'

'No.'

'Before heaven?'

‘No. We are not married.’

‘As my betrothed, will you wear them, to please me?’

‘I would rather not. I cannot wear borrowed jewels. These I cannot wear. Forgive me, I cannot. And, Willoughby,’ she said, scorning herself for want of fortitude in not keeping to the simply blunt provocative refusal, ‘does one not look like a victim decked for the sacrifice? – the garlanded heifer you see on Greek vases, in that array of jewellery?’

‘My dear Clara!’ exclaimed the astonished lover, ‘how can you term them borrowed, when they are the Patterne jewels, our family heirloom pearls, unmatched, I venture to affirm, decidedly in my county and many others, and passing to the use of the mistress of the house in the natural course of things?’

‘They are yours, they are not mine.’

‘Prospectively they are yours.’

‘It would be to anticipate the fact to wear them.’

‘With my consent, my approval? at my request?’

‘I am not yet… I never may be…’

‘My wife?’ He laughed triumphantly, and silenced her by manly smothering.

Her scruple was perhaps an honourable one, he said. Perhaps the jewels were safer in their iron box. He had merely intended a surprise and gratification to her.

Courage was coming to enable her to speak more plainly, when his discontinuing to insist on her wearing the jewels, under an appearance of deference of her wishes, disarmed her by touching her sympathies.

She said, however, ‘I fear we do not often agree, Willoughby.’

‘When you are a little older!’ was the irritating answer.

‘It would then be too late to make the discovery.’

‘The discovery, I apprehend, is not imperative, my love.’

‘It seems to me that our minds are opposed.’

‘I should,’ said he, ‘have been awake to it at a single indication, be sure.’

‘But I know,’ she pursued, ‘I have learned that the ideal of conduct for women is to subject their minds to the part of an accompaniment.’

‘For women, my love? my wife will be in natural harmony with me.’

‘Ah!’ She compressed her lips. The yawn would come. ‘I am sleepier here than anywhere.’

‘Ours, my Clara, is the finest air of the kingdom. It has the effect of sea-air.’

‘But if I am always asleep here?’

‘We shall have to make a public exhibition of the Beauty.’

This dash of his liveliness defeated her.

She left him, feeling the contempt of the brain feverishly quickened and fine-pointed, for the brain chewing the cud in the happy pastures of unawakedness. So violent was the fever, so keen her introspection, that she spared few, and Vernon was not among them. Young Crossjay, whom she considered the least able of all to act as an ally, was the only one she courted with a real desire to please him, he was the one she affectionately envied; he was the youngest, the freest, he had the world before him, and he did not know how horrible the world was, or could be made to look. She loved the boy from expecting nothing of him. Others, Vernon Whitford, for instance, could help, and moved no hand. He read her case. A scrutiny so penetrating under its air of abstract thoughtfulness, though his eyes did but rest on her a second or two, signified that he read her line by line, and to the end – excepting what she thought of him for probing her with that sharp steel of insight without a purpose.

She knew her mind’s injustice. It was her case, her lamentable case – the impatient panic-stricken nerves of a captured wild creature which cried for help. She exaggerated her sufferings to get strength to throw them off, and lost it in the recognition that they were exaggerated: and out of the conflict issued recklessness, with a cry as wild as any coming of madness; for she did not blush in saying to herself: ‘If some one loved me!’ Before hearing of Constantia, she had mused upon liberty as a virgin Goddess – men were out of her thoughts; even the figure of a rescuer, if one dawned in her mind, was more angel than hero. That fair childish maidenliness had ceased. With her body straining in her dragon’s grasp, with the savour of loathing, unable to contend, unable to speak aloud, she began to speak to herself, and all the health of her nature made her outcry womanly: ‘If I were loved!’ –not for the sake of love, but for free breathing; and her utterance of it was to insure life and enduringness to the wish, as the yearning of a mother on a drowning ship is to get her infant to shore. ‘If some noble gentleman could see me as I am and

not disdain to aid me! Oh! to be caught up out of this prison of thorns and brambles. I cannot tear my own way out. I am a coward. My cry for help confesses that. A beckoning of a finger would change me, I believe. I could fly bleeding and through hootings to a comrade. Oh! a comrade! I do not want a lover. I should find another Egoist, not so bad, but enough to make me take a breath like death. I could follow a

soldier, like poor Sally or Molly. He stakes his life for his country, and a woman may be proud of the worst of men who do that. Constantia met a soldier. Perhaps she prayed and her prayer was answered. She did ill. But, oh, how I love her for it! His name was Harry Oxford. Papa would call him her Perseus. She must have felt that there was no explaining what she suffered. She had only to act, to plunge. First she fixed her mind on Harry Oxford. To be able to speak his name and see him awaiting her, must have been relief, a reprieve. She did not waver, she cut the links, she signed herself over. Oh, brave girl! what do you think of me? But I have no Harry Whitford, I am alone. Let anything be said against women; we must be very bad to have such bad things written of us: only, say this, that to ask them to sign themselves over by oath and ceremony, because of an ignorant promise, to the man they have been mistaken in, is – it is –' the sudden consciousness that she had put another name for Oxford, struck her a buffet, drowning her in crimson.

CHAPTER 11

The Double-Blossom Wild Cherry-Tree

SIR WILLOUGHBY chose a moment when Clara was with him and he had a good retreat through folding-windows to the lawn, in case of cogency on the enemy's part, to attack his cousin regarding the preposterous plot to upset the family by a scamper to London: 'By the way, Vernon, what is this you've been mumbling to everybody save me, about leaving us to pitch yourself into the stew-pot and be made broth of? London is no better, and you are fit for considerably better. Don't, I beg you, continue to annoy me. Take a run abroad, if you are restless. Take two or three months, and join us as we are travelling home; and then think of settling, pray. Follow my example, if you like. You can have one of my cottages, or a place built for you. Anything to keep a man from destroying the sense of stability about one. In London, my dear old fellow, you lose your identity. What are you there? I ask you, what? One has the feeling of the house crumbling when a man is perpetually for shifting and cannot fix himself. Here you are known, you can study at your ease; up in London you are nobody; I tell you honestly, I feel it myself; a week of London literally drives me home to discover the individual where I left him. Be advised. You don't mean to go.'

'I have the intention,' said Vernon.

'Why?'

'I've mentioned it to you.'

'To my face?'

'Over your shoulder is generally the only chance you give me.'

'You have not mentioned it to me, to my knowledge. As to the reason, I might hear a dozen of your reasons, and I should not understand one. It's against your interests and against my wishes. Come, friend, I am not the only one you distress. Why, Vernon, you yourself have said that the English would be very perfect Jews if they could manage to live on the patriarchal system. You said it, yes, you said it! – but I recollect it clearly. Oh, as for your double-meanings, you said the thing, and you jeered at the incapacity of English families to live together, on account of bad temper; and now you are the first to break up our union! I decidedly do not profess to be a perfect Jew, but I do…'

Sir Willoughby caught signs of a probably smiling commerce between his bride and his cousin. He raised his face, appeared to be consulting his eyelids, and resolved to laugh: 'Well, I own it. I do like the idea of living patriarchally.' He turned to Clara. 'The Rev. Doctor one of us!'

'My father?' she said.

'Why not?'

'Papa's habits are those of a scholar.'

'That you might not be separated from him, my dear!'

Clara thanked Sir Willoughby for the kindness of thinking of her father, mentally analysing the kindness, in which at least she found no unkindness, scarcely egoism, though she knew it to be there.

‘We might propose it,’ said he.

‘As a compliment?’

‘If he would condescend to accept it as a compliment. These great scholars!… And if Vernon goes, our inducement for Dr Middleton to stay… But it is too absurd for discussion. Oh, Vernon, about Master Crossjay; I will see to it.’

He was about to give Vernon his shoulder and step into the garden, when Clara said, ‘You will have Crossjay trained for the navy, Willoughby? There is not a day to lose.’

‘Yes, yes; I will see to it. Depend on me for holding the young rascal in view.’

He presented his hand to her to lead her over the step to the gravel, surprised to behold how flushed she was.

She responded to the invitation by putting her hand forth from a bent elbow, with hesitating fingers. ‘It should not be postponed, Willoughby.’

Her attitude suggested a stipulation before she touched him.

‘It’s an affair of money, as you know, Willoughby,’ said Vernon. ‘If I’m in London, I can’t well provide for the boy for some time to come, or it’s not certain that I can.’

‘Why on earth should you go?’

‘That’s another matter. I want you to take my place with him.’

‘In which case the circumstances are changed. I am responsible for him, and I have a right to bring him up according to my own prescription.’

‘We are likely to have one idle lout the more.’

‘I guarantee to make a gentleman of him.’

‘We have too many of your gentlemen already.’

‘You can’t have enough, my good Vernon.’

‘They’re the national apology for indolence. Training a penniless boy to be one of them is nearly as bad as an education in a thieves’ den; he will be just as much at war with society, if not game for the police.’

‘Vernon, have you seen Crossjay’s father, the now Captain of Marines? I think you have.’

‘He’s a good man and a very gallant officer.’

‘And in spite of his qualities he’s a cub, and an old cub. He is a captain now, but he takes that rank very late, you will own. There you have what you call a good man, undoubtedly a gallant officer, neutralized by the fact that he is not a gentleman. Holding intercourse with him is out of the question. No wonder Government declines to advance him rapidly. Young Crossjay does not bear your name. He bears mine, and on that point alone I should have a voice in the settlement of his career. And I say emphatically that a drawing-room approval of a young man is the best certificate for his general chances in life. I know of a City of London merchant of some sort, and I know a firm of lawyers, who will have none but University men in their office; at least, they have the preference.’

‘Crossjay has a bullet head, fit neither for the University nor the drawing-room,’ said Vernon; ‘equal to fighting and dying for you, and that’s all.’

Sir Willoughby contented himself with replying, ‘The lad is a favourite of mine.’

His anxiety to escape a rejoinder caused him to step into the garden, leaving Clara behind him. ‘My love!’ said he, in apology, as he turned to her. She could not look stern, but she had a look without a dimple to soften it, and her eyes shone. For she had wagered in her heart that the dialogue she provoked upon Crossjay would expose the Egoist. And there were other motives, wrapped up and intertwisted, unrecognizable, sufficient to strike her with worse than the flush of her self-knowledge of wickedness when she detained him to speak of Crossjay before Vernon.

At last it had been seen that she was conscious of suffering in her association with this Egoist! Vernon stood for the world taken into her confidence. The world, then, would not think so ill of her, she thought hopefully, at the same time that she thought most evilly of herself. But self-accusations were for the day of reckoning; she would and must have the world with her, or the belief that it was coming to her, in the terrible struggle she foresaw within her horizon of self, now her utter boundary. She needed it for the inevitable conflict. Little sacrifices of her honesty might be made. Considering how weak she was, how solitary, how dismally entangled, daily disgraced beyond the power of any veiling to conceal from her fiery sensations, a little hypocrisy was a poor girl’s natural weapon. She crushed her conscientious mind with the assurance that it was magnifying trifles: not entirely unaware that she was thereby preparing it for a convenient blindness in the presence of dread alternatives; but the pride of laying such stress on small sins gave her purity a blush of pleasure and overcame the inner warning. In truth she dared not think evilly of

herself for long, sailing into battle as she was. Nuns and anchorites may; they have leisure. She regretted the forfeits she had to pay for self-assistance, and, if it might be won, the world's; regretted, felt the peril of the loss, and took them up and flung them.

'You see, old Vernon has no argument,' Willoughby said to her.

He drew her hand more securely on his arm, to make her sensible that she leaned on a pillar of strength.

'Whenever the little brain is in doubt, perplexed, undecided which course to adopt, she will come to me, will she not? I shall always listen,' he resumed, soothingly. 'My own! and I to you when the world vexes me. So we round our completeness. You will know me; you will know me in good time. I am not a mystery to those to whom I unfold myself. I do not pretend to mystery: yet, I will confess, your home – your heart's – Willoughby is not exactly identical with the Willoughby before the world. One must be armed against that rough beast.'

Certain is the vengeance of the young upon monotony; nothing more certain. They do not scheme it, but sameness is a poison to their systems; and vengeance is their heartier breathing, their stretch of the limbs, run in the fields; nature avenges them.

'When does Colonel De Craye arrive?' said Clara.

'Horace? In two or three days. You wish him to be on the spot to learn his part, my love?'

She had not flown forward to the thought of Colonel De Craye's arrival; she knew not why she had mentioned him; but now she flew back, shocked, first into shadowy subterfuge, and then into the criminal's dock.

'I do not wish him to be here. I do not know that he has a part to learn. I have no wish. Willoughby, did you not say I should come to you and you would listen? – will you listen? I am so commonplace that I shall not be understood by you unless you take my words for the very meaning of the words. I am unworthy. I am volatile. I love my liberty. I want to be free…'

'Flitch!' he called.

It sounded necromantic.

'Pardon me, my love,' he said. 'The man you see yonder violates my express injunction that he is not to come on my grounds, and here I find him on the borders of my garden!'

Sir Willoughby waved his hand to the abject figure of a man standing to intercept him.

'Volatile, unworthy, liberty – my dearest!' he bent to her when the man had appeased him by departing, 'you are at liberty within the law, like all good women; I shall control and direct your volatility; and your sense of worthiness must be re-established when we are more intimate; it is timidity. The sense of unworthiness is a guarantee of worthiness ensuing. I believe I am in the vein of a sermon! Whose the fault? The sight of that man was annoying. Flitch was a stable-boy, groom, and coachman, like his father before him, at the Hall thirty years; his father died in our service. Mr Flitch had not a single grievance here; only one day the demon seizes him with the notion of bettering himself, he wants his independence, and he presents himself to me with a story of a shop in our county town – Flitch! remember, if you go you go for good! – Oh, he quite comprehended – Very well; good-bye, Flitch! – the man was respectful: he looked the fool he was very soon to turn out to be. Since then, within a period of several years, I have had him, against my express injunctions, ten times on my grounds. It's curious to calculate. Of course the shop failed, and Flitch's independence consists in walking about with his hands in his empty pockets, and looking at the Hall from some elevation near.'

'Is he married? Has he children?' said Clara.

'Nine; and a wife that cannot cook or sew or wash linen.'

'You could not give him employment?'

'After his having dismissed himself?'

'It might be overlooked.'

'Here he was happy. He decided to go elsewhere, to be free – of course, of my yoke. He quitted my service against my warning. Flitch, we will say, emigrated with his wife and nine children, and the ship foundered. He returns, but his place is filled; he is a ghost here, and I object to ghosts.'

'Some work might be found for him.'

'It will be the same with old Vernon, my dear. If he goes, he goes for good. It is the vital principle of my authority to insist on that. A dead leaf might as reasonably demand to return to the tree. Once off, off for all eternity! I am sorry, but such was your decision, my friend. I have, you see, Clara, elements in me –'

'Dreadful!'

'Exert your persuasive powers with Vernon. You can do well-nigh what you will with the old fellow. We

have Miss Dale this evening for a week or two. Lead him to some ideas of her. – Elements in me, I was remarking, which will no more bear to be handled carelessly than gunpowder. At the same time, there is no reason why they should not be respected, managed with some degree of regard for me and attention to consequences. Those who have not done so have repented.'

'You do not speak to others of the elements in you,' said Clara.

'I certainly do not: I have but one bride,' was his handsome reply.

'Is it fair to me that you should show me the worst of you?'

'All myself, my own?'

His ingratiating droop and familiar smile rendered 'All myself' so affectionately meaningful in its happy reliance upon her excess of love, that at last she understood she was expected to worship him and uphold him for whatsoever he might be, without any estimation of qualities: as indeed love does, or young love does: as she perhaps did once, before he chilled her senses. That was before her 'little brain' had become active and had turned her senses to revolt.

It was on the full river of love that Sir Willoughby supposed the whole floating bulk of his personality to be securely sustained; and therefore it was that, believing himself swimming at his ease, he discoursed of himself.

She went straight away from that idea with her mental exclamation: 'Why does he not paint himself in brighter colours to me!' and the question: 'Has he no ideal of generosity and chivalry?'

But the unfortunate gentleman imagined himself to be loved, on Love's very bosom. He fancied that everything relating to himself excited maidenly curiosity, womanly reverence, ardours to know more of him, which he was ever willing to satisfy by repeating the same things. His notion of women was the primitive black and white: there are good women, bad women; and he possessed a good one. His high opinion of himself fortified the belief that Providence, as a matter of justice and fitness, must necessarily select a good one for him – or what are we to think of Providence? And this female, shaped by that informing hand, would naturally be in harmony with him, from the centre of his profound identity to the raying circle of his variations. Know the centre, you know the circle, and you discover that the variations are simply characteristics, but you must travel on the rays from the circle to get to the centre. Consequently Sir Willoughby put Miss Middleton on one or other of these converging lines from time to time. Us, too, he drags into the deeps, but when we have harpooned a whale and are attached to the rope, down we must go; the miracle is to see us rise again.

Women of mixed essences shading off the divine to the considerably lower were outside his vision of woman. His mind could as little admit an angel in pottery as a rogue in porcelain. For him they were what they were when fashioned at the beginning; many cracked, many stained, here and there a perfect specimen designed for the elect of men. At a whisper of the world he shut the prude's door on them with a slam; himself would have branded them with the letters in the hue of fire. Privately he did so; and he was constituted by his extreme sensitiveness and taste for ultra-feminine refinement to be a severe critic of them during the carnival of egoism, the love-season. Constantia… can it be told? She had been, be it said, a fair and frank young merchant with him in that season; she was of a nature to be a mother of heroes; she met the salute, almost half-way, ingenuously unlike the coming mothers of the regiments of marionettes, who retire in vapours, downcast, as by convention; ladies most flattering to the egoistical gentleman, for they proclaim him the 'first'. Constantia's offence had been no greater, but it was not that dramatic performance of purity which he desired of an affianced lady, and so the offence was great.

The love-season is the carnival of egoism, and it brings the

touchstone to our natures. I speak of love, not the mask, and not of the flutings upon the theme of love, but of the passion; a flame having, like our mortality, death in it as well as life, that may or may not be lasting. Applied to Sir Willoughby, as to thousands of civilized males, the touchstone found him requiring to be dealt with by his betrothed as an original savage. She was required to play incessantly on the first reclaiming chord which led our ancestral satyr to the measures of the dance, the threading of the maze, and the setting conformably to his partner before it was accorded to him to spin her with both hands and a chirrup of his frisky heels. To keep him in awe and hold him enchained, there are things she must never do, dare never say, must not think. She must be cloistral. Now, strange and awful though it be to hear, women perceive this requirement of them in the spirit of the man; they perceive, too, and it may be gratefully, that they address their performances less to the taming of the green and prankish monsieur of the forest than to the pacification of a

voracious aesthetic gluttony, craving them insatiably, through all the tenses, with shrieks of the lamentable letter 'I' for their purity. Whether they see that it has its foundation in the sensual, and

distinguish the ultra-refined but lineally great-grandson of the Hoof in this vast and dainty exacting appetite is uncertain. They probably do not; the more the damage; for in the appeasement of the glutton they have to practise much simulation; they are in their way losers like their ancient mothers. It is the palpable and material of them still which they are tempted to flourish, wherewith to invite and allay pursuit: a condition under which the spiritual, wherein their hope lies, languishes. The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later they see they have been victims of the singular Egoist, have worn a mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight, and have really abandoned the commodity in ministering to the lust for it,

suffered themselves to be dragged ages back in playing upon the fleshly innocence of happy accident to gratify his jealous greed of possession, when it should have been their task to set the soul above the fairest fortune and the gift of strength in women beyond ornamental whiteness. Are they not of nature warriors, like men? – men's mates to bear them heroes instead of puppets? But the devouring male Egoist prefers them as inanimate overwrought polished pure metal precious vessels, fresh from the hands of the artificer, for him to walk away with hugging, call all his own, drink of, and fill and drink of, and forget that he stole them.

This running off on a by-road is no deviation from Sir Willoughby Patterne and Miss Clara Middleton. He, a fairly intelligent man, and very sensitive, was blinded to what was going on within her visibly enough, by her production of the article he demanded of her sex. He had to leave the fair young lady to ride to his county-town, and his design was to conduct her through the covert of a group of laurels, there to revel in her soft confusion. She resisted; nay, resolutely returned to the lawn-sward. He contrasted her with Constantia in the amorous time, and rejoiced in his disappointment. He saw the goddess Modesty guarding Purity; and one would be bold to say that he did not hear the Precepts, Purity's aged grannams maternal and paternal, cawing approval of her over their munching gums. And if you ask whether a man, sensitive and a lover, can be so blinded, you are condemned to reperuse the foregoing paragraph.

Miss Middleton was not sufficiently instructed in the position of her sex to know that she had plunged herself in the thick of the strife of one of their great battles. Her personal position, however, was instilling knowledge rapidly, as a disease in the frame teaches us what we are and have to contend with. Could she marry this man? He was evidently manageable. Could she condescend to the use of arts in managing him to obtain a placable life? – a horror of swampy flatness! So vividly did the sight of that dead heaven over an unvarying level earth swim on her fancy, that she shut her eyes in angry exclusion of it as if it were outside, assailing her; and she nearly stumbled upon young Crossjay.

'Oh, have I hurt you?' he cried.

'No,' said she, 'it was my fault. Lead me somewhere away from everybody.'

The boy took her hand, and she resumed her thoughts; and, pressing his fingers and feeling warm to him both for his presence and silence, so does the blood in youth lead the mind, even cool and innocent blood, even with a touch, that she said to herself, 'And if I marry, and then… Where will honour be then? I marry him to be true to my word of honour, and if then…!' An intolerable languor caused her to sigh profoundly. It is written as she thought it; she thought in blanks, as girls do, and some women. A shadow of the male Egoist is in the chamber of their brains overawing them.

'Were I to marry, and to run!' There is the thought; she is offered up to your mercy. We are dealing with a girl feeling herself desperately situated, and not a fool.

'I'm sure you're dead tired, though,' said Crossjay.

'No, I am not; what makes you think so?' said Clara.

'I do think so.'

'But why do you think so?'

'You're so hot.'

'What makes you think that?'

'You're so red.'

'So are you, Crossjay.'

'I'm only red in the middle of the cheeks, except when I've been running. And then you talk to yourself, just as boys do when they are blown.'

'Do they?'

'They say: "I know I could have kept up longer", or, "my buckle broke", all to themselves, when they break down running.'

‘And you have noticed that?’

‘And, Miss Middleton, I don’t wish you were a boy, but I should like to live near you all my life and be a gentleman. I’m coming with Miss Dale this evening to stay at the Hall and be looked after, instead of stopping with her cousin who takes care of her father. Perhaps you and I’ll play chess at night.’

‘At night you will go to bed, Crossjay.’

‘Not if I have Sir Willoughby to catch hold of. He says I’m an authority on birds’ eggs. I can manage rabbits and poultry. Isn’t a farmer a happy man? But he doesn’t marry ladies. A cavalry officer has the best chance.’

‘But you are going to be a naval officer.’

‘I don’t know. It’s not positive. I shall bring my two dormice, and make them perform gymnastics on the dinner-table. They’re such dear little things. Naval officers are not like Sir Willoughby.’

‘No, they are not,’ said Clara, ‘they give their lives to their country.’

‘And then they’re dead,’ said Crossjay.

Clara wished Sir Willoughby were confronting her: she could have spoken.

She asked the boy where Mr Whitford was. Crossjay pointed very secretly in the direction of the double-blossom wild-cherry. Coming within gaze of the stem, she beheld Vernon stretched at length, reading, she supposed; asleep, she discovered: his finger in the leaves of a book; and what book? She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay’s hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and

weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: ‘He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!’ She would rather have clung to her first impression: wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns; but the thought of it was no recovery of it; she might as well have striven to be a child. The sensation of happiness promised to be less short-lived in memory, and would have been had not her present disease of the longing for happiness ravaged every corner of it for the secret of its existence. The reflection took root. ‘He must be good…!’ That reflection vowed to endure. Poor by comparison with what it displaced, it presented itself to her as conferring something on him, and she would not have had it absent though it robbed her.

She looked down. Vernon was dreamily looking up.

She plucked Crossjay hurriedly away, whispering that he had better not wake Mr Whitford, and then she proposed to reverse their previous chase, and she be the hound and he the hare. Crossjay fetched a magnificent start. On his glancing behind he saw Miss Middleton walking listlessly, with a hand at her side.

‘There’s a regular girl!’ said he in some disgust; for his theory was, that girls always have something the matter with them to spoil a game.

CHAPTER 12

Miss Middleton and Mr Vernon Whitford

LOOKING upward, not quite awakened out of a transient doze, at a fair head circled in dazzling blossom, one may temporize awhile with common sense, and take it for a vision after the eyes have regained direction of the mind. Vernon did so until the plastic vision interwound with reality alarmingly. This is the embrace of a Melusine[13] who will soon have the brain if she is encouraged. Slight dalliance with her makes the very diminutive seem as big as life. He jumped to his feet, rattled his throat, planted firmness on his brows and mouth, and attacked the dream-giving earth with tremendous long strides, that his blood might be lively at the throne of understanding. Miss Middleton and young Crossjay were within hail: it was her face he had seen, and still the idea of a vision, chased from his reasonable wits, knocked hard and again for

readmission.

There was little for a man of humble mind toward the sex to think of in the fact of a young lady's bending rather low to peep at him asleep, except that the poise of her slender figure, between an air of spying and of listening, vividly recalled his likening of her to the Mountain Echo. Man or maid sleeping in the open air provokes your tiptoe curiosity. Men, it is known, have in that state cruelly been kissed; and no rights are bestowed on them, they are teased by a vapourish rapture; what has happened to them the poor fellows barely divine: they have a crazy step from that day. But a vision is not so distracting; it is our own, we can put it aside and return to it, play at rich and poor with it, and are not to be summoned before your laws and rules for secreting it in our treasury. Besides, it is the golden key of all the possible; new worlds expand beneath the dawn it brings us. Just outside reality, it illumines,enriches, and softens real things; – and to desire it in preference to the simple fact is a damning proof of enervation.

Such was Vernon's winding up of his brief drama of fantasy. He was aware of the fantastical element in him and soon had it under. Which of us who is of any worth is without it? He had not much vanity to trouble him, and passion was quiet, so his task was not gigantic. Especially be it remarked, that he was a man of quick pace, the sovereign remedy for the dispersing of the mental fen-mist. He had tried it and knew that nonsense is to be walked off.

Near the end of the park young Crossjay overtook him, and after acting the pumped one a trifle more than needful, cried: 'I say, Mr Whitford, there's Miss Middleton with her handkerchief out.'

'What for, my lad?' said Vernon.

'I'm sure I don't know. All of a sudden she bumped down. And, look what fellows girls are! – here she comes as if nothing had happened, and I saw her feel at her side.'

Clara was shaking her head to express a denial. 'I am not at all unwell,' she said, when she came near. 'I guessed Crossjay's business in running up to you; he's a good-for-nothing, officious boy. I was tired, and rested for a moment.'

Crossjay peered at her eyelids. Vernon looked away and said: 'Are you too tired for a stroll?'

'Not now.'

'Shall it be brisk?'

'You have the lead.'

He led at a swing of the legs that accelerated young Crossjay's to the double, but she with her short, swift, equal steps glided along easily on a line by his shoulder, and he groaned to think that of all the girls of earth this one should have been chosen for the position of fine lady.

'You won't tire me,' said she, in answer to his look.

'You remind me of the little Piedmontese Bersaglieri on the march.'

'I have seen them trotting into Como from Milan.'

'They cover a quantity of ground in a day, if the ground's flat. You want another sort of step for the mountains.'

'I should not attempt to dance up.'

'They soon tame romantic notions of them.'

'The mountains tame luxurious dreams, you mean. I see how they are conquered. I can plod. Anything to be high up!'

'Well, there you have the secret of good work: to plod on and still keep the passion fresh.'

'Yes, when we have an aim in view.'

'We always have one.'

'Captives have?'

'More than the rest of us.'

Ignorant man! What of wives miserably wedded? What aim in view have these most woeful captives? Horror shrouds it, and shame reddens through the folds to tell of innermost horror.

'Take me back to the mountains, if you please, Mr Whitford,' Miss Middleton said, fallen out of sympathy with him. 'Captives have death in view, but that is not an aim.'

'Why may not captives expect a release?'

'Hardly from a tyrant.'

'If you are thinking of tyrants, it may be so. Say the tyrant dies?'

'The prison-gates are unlocked and out comes a skeleton. But why will you talk of skeletons! The very name of mountain seems life in comparison with any other subject.'

‘I assure you,’ said Vernon, with the fervour of a man lighting on an actual truth in his conversation with a young lady, ‘it’s not the first time I have thought you would be at home in the Alps. You would walk and climb as well as you dance.’

She liked to hear Clara Middleton talked of, and of her having been thought of: and giving him friendly eyes, barely noticing that he was in a glow, she said: ‘If you speak so encouragingly I shall fancy we are near an ascent.’

‘I wish we were,’ said he.

‘We can realize it by dwelling on it, don’t you think?’

‘We can begin climbing.’

‘Oh!’ she squeezed herself shadowily.

‘Which mountain shall it be?’ said Vernon, in the right real earnest tone.

Miss Middleton suggested a lady’s mountain first, for a trial. ‘And then, if you think well enough of me – if I have not stumbled more than twice, or asked more than ten times how far it is from the top, I should like to be promoted to scale a giant.’

They went up to some of the lesser heights of Switzerland and Styria, and settled in South Tyrol, the young lady preferring this district for the strenuous exercise of her climbing powers because she loved Italian colour; and it seemed an exceedingly good reason to the genial imagination she had awakened in Mr Whitford. ‘Though,’ said he, abruptly, ‘you are not so much Italian as French.’

She hoped she was English, she remarked.

‘Of course you are English;… yes.’ He moderated his ascent with the halting affirmative.

She inquired wonderingly why he spoke in apparent hesitation.

‘Well, you have French feet, for example: French wits, French impatience,’ he lowered his voice, ‘and charm.’

‘And love of compliments.’

‘Possibly. I was not conscious of paying them.’

‘And a disposition to rebel?’

‘To challenge authority, at least.’

‘That is a dreadful character.’

‘At all events, it is a character.’

‘Fit for an Alpine comrade?’

‘For the best of comrades anywhere.’

‘It is not a piece of drawing-room sculpture: that is the most one can say for it!’ she dropped a dramatic sigh.

Had he been willing she would have continued the theme, for the pleasure a poor creature long gnawing her sensations finds in seeing herself from the outside. It fell away. After a silence, she could not renew it; and he was evidently indifferent, having to his own satisfaction dissected and stamped her a foreigner. With it passed her holiday. She had forgotten Sir Willoughby: she remembered him and said: ‘You knew Miss Durham, Mr Whitford?’

He answered, briefly, ‘I did.’

‘Was she?…’ some hot-faced inquiry peered forth and withdrew.

‘Very handsome,’ said Vernon.

‘English?’

‘Yes; the dashing style of English.’

‘Very courageous.’

‘I dare say she had a kind of courage.’

‘She did very wrong.’

‘I won’t say no. She discovered a man more of a match with herself; luckily not too late. We’re at the mercy…’

‘Was she not unpardonable?’

‘I should be sorry to think that of any one.’

‘But you agree that she did wrong.’

‘I suppose I do. She made a mistake and she corrected it. If she had not, she would have made a greater mistake.’

‘The manner…’

‘That was bad – as far as we know. The world has not much right to judge. A false start must now and then be made. It’s better not to take notice of it, I think.’

‘What is it we are at the mercy of?’

‘Currents of feeling, our natures. I am the last man to preach on the subject: young ladies are enigmas to me; I fancy they must have a natural perception of the husband suitable to them, and the reverse; and if they have a certain degree of courage, it follows that they please themselves.’

‘They are not to reflect on the harm they do?’ said Miss Middleton.

‘By all means let them reflect; they hurt nobody by doing that.’

‘But a breach of faith!’

‘If the faith can be kept through life, all’s well.’

‘And then there is the cruelty, the injury!’

‘I really think that if a young lady came to me to inform me she must break our engagement – I have never been put to the proof, but to suppose it: – I should not think her cruel.’

‘Then she would not be much of a loss.’

‘And I should not think so for this reason, that it is impossible for a girl to come to such a resolution without previously showing signs of it to her… the man she is engaged to. I think it unfair to engage a girl for longer than a week or two, just time enough for her preparations and publications.’

‘If he is always intent on himself, signs are likely to be unheeded by him,’ said Miss Middleton.

He did not answer, and she said, quickly:

‘It must always be a cruelty. The world will think so. It is an act of inconstancy.’

‘If they knew one another well before they were engaged.’

‘Are you not singularly tolerant?’ said she.

To which Vernon replied with airy cordiality:

‘In some cases it is right to judge by results; we’ll leave severity to the historian, who is bound to be a professional moralist and put pleas of human nature out of the scales. The lady in question may have been to blame, but no hearts were broken, and here we have four happy instead of two miserable.’

His persecuting geniality of countenance appealed to her to confirm this judgement by results, and she nodded and said: ‘Four,’ as the awe-stricken speak.

From that moment until young Crossjay fell into the green-rutted lane from a tree, and was got on his legs half stunned, with a hanging lip and a face like the inside of a flayed eel-skin, she might have been walking in the desert, and alone, for the pleasure she had in society.

They led the fated lad home between them, singularly drawn together by their joint ministrations to him, in which her delicacy had to stand fire, and sweet good-nature made naught of any trial. They were hand in hand with the little fellow as physician and professional nurse.

CHAPTER 13

The First Effort after Freedom

CROSSJAY’S accident was only another proof, as Vernon told Miss Dale, that the boy was but half monkey.

‘Something fresh?’ she exclaimed on seeing him brought into the Hall, where she had just arrived.

‘Simply a continuation,’ said Vernon. ‘He is not so prehensile as he should be. He probably in extremity relies on the tail that has been docked. Are you a man, Crossjay?’

‘I should think I was!’ Crossjay replied, with an old man’s voice, and a ghastly twitch for a smile overwhelmed the compassionate ladies.

Miss Dale took possession of him. ‘You err in the other direction,’ she remarked to Vernon.

‘But a little bracing roughness is better than spoiling him,’ said Miss Middleton.

She did not receive an answer, and she thought: ‘Whatever Willoughby does is right, to this lady!’

Clara’s impression was renewed when Sir Willoughby sat beside Miss Dale in the evening; and certainly

she had never seen him shine so picturesquely as in his bearing with Miss Dale. The sprightly sallies of the two, their rallyings, their laughter, and her fine eyes, and his handsome gestures, won attention like a fencing match of a couple keen with the foils to display the mutual skill. And it was his design that she should admire the display; he was anything but obtuse; enjoying the match as he did and necessarily did to act so excellent a part in it, he meant the observer to see the man he was with a lady not of raw understanding. So it went on from day to day for three days.

She fancied once that she detected the agreeable stirring of the brood of jealousy, and found it neither in her heart nor in her mind, but in the book of wishes, well known to the young where they write matter which may sometimes be independent of both those volcanic albums. Jealousy would have been a relief to her, a dear devil's aid. She studied the complexion of jealousy to delude herself with the sense of the spirit being in her, and all the while she laughed, as at a vile theatre whereof the imperfection of the stage machinery rather than the performance is the wretched source of amusement.

Vernon had deeply depressed her. She was hunted by the figure 4. *Four happy instead of two miserable*. He had said it, involving her among the four; and so it must be, she considered, and she must be as happy as she could; for not only was he incapable of perceiving her state, he was unable to imagine other circumstances to surround her. How, to be just to him, were they imaginable by him or any one?

Her horrible isolation of secrecy in a world amiable in unsuspectingness frightened her. To fling away her secret, to conform, to be unrebellious, uncritical, submissive, became an impatient desire; and the task did not appear so difficult since Miss Dale's arrival. Endearments had been rare, more formal; living bodily untroubled and unashamed, and, as she phrased it, having no one to care for her, she turned insensibly in the direction where she was due; she slightly imitated Miss Dale's colloquial responsiveness. To tell truth, she felt vivacious in a moderate way with Willoughby after seeing him with Miss Dale. Liberty wore the aspect of a towering prison-wall; the desperate undertaking of climbing one side and dropping to the other was more than she, unaided, could resolve on; consequently, as no one cared for her, a worthless creature might as well cease dreaming and stipulating for the fulfilment of her dreams; she might as well yield to her fate; nay, make the best of it.

Sir Willoughby was flattered and satisfied. Clara's adopted vivacity proved his thorough knowledge of feminine nature; nor did her feebleness in sustaining it displease him. A steady look of hers had of late perplexed the man, and he was comforted by signs of her inefficiency where he excelled. The effort and the failure were both of good omen.

But she could not continue the effort. He had overweighted her too much for the mimicry of a sentiment to harden and have an apparently natural place among her impulses; and now an idea came to her that he might, it might be hoped, possibly see in Miss Dale, by present contrast, the mate he sought; by contrast with an unanswering creature like herself, he might perhaps realize in Miss Dale's greater accomplishments and her devotion to him the merit of suitability; he might be induced to do her justice. Dim as the loop-hole was, Clara fixed her mind on it till it gathered light. And as a prelude to action, she plunged herself into a state of such profound humility that to accuse it of being simulated would be venturesome, though it was not positive. The tempers of the young are liquid fires in isles of quicksand; the precious metals not yet cooled in a solid earth. Her compassion for Laetitia was less forced, but really she was almost as earnest in her self-abasement, for she had not latterly been brilliant, not even adequate to the ordinary requirements of conversation. She had no courage, no wit, no diligence, nothing that she could distinguish save discontentment like a corroding acid and she went so far in sincerity as with a curious shift of feeling to pity the man plighted to her. If it suited her purpose to pity Sir Willoughby, she was not moved by policy, be assured; her needs were her nature, her moods her mind; she had the capacity to make anything serve her by passing into it with the glance which discerned its usefulness; and this is how it is that the young, when they are in trouble, without approaching the elevation of scientific hypocrites, can teach that able class lessons in hypocrisy.

'Why should not Willoughby be happy,' she said; and the exclamation was pushed forth by the second thought: 'Then I shall be free!' Still that thought came second.

The desire for the happiness of Willoughby was fervent on his behalf, and wafted her far from friends and letters to a narrow Tyrolean valley, where a shallow river ran, with the indentations of a remotely seen army of winding ranks in column, topaz over the pebbles to hollows of ravishing emerald. There sat Liberty, after her fearful leap over the prison-wall, at peace to watch the water and the falls of sunshine on the mountain above, between descending pine-stem shadows. Clara's wish for his happiness, as soon as she had housed herself in the imagination of her freedom, was of a purity that made it seem exceedingly easy for her to speak to him.

The opportunity was offered by Sir Willoughby. Every morning after breakfast Miss Dale walked across

the park to see her father, and on this occasion Sir Willoughby and Miss Middleton went with her as far as the lake, all three discoursing of the beauty of various trees, birches, aspens, poplars, beeches, then in their new green. Miss Dale loved the aspen, Miss Middleton the beech, Sir Willoughby the birch, and pretty things were said by each in praise of the favoured object, particularly by Miss Dale. So much so that when she had gone on he recalled one of her remarks, and said: 'I believe, if the whole place were swept away to-morrow, Laetitia Dale could reconstruct it and put those aspens on the north of the lake in number and situation correctly where you have them now. I would guarantee her description of it in absence correct.'

'Why should she be absent?' said Clara, palpitating.

'Well, why!' returned Sir Willoughby. 'As you say, there is no reason why. The art of life, and mine will be principally a country life – town is not life, but a tornado whirling atoms – the art is to associate a group of sympathetic friends in our neighbourhood; and it is a fact worth noting that if ever I feel tired of the place, a short talk with Laetitia Dale refreshes it more than a month or two on the Continent. She has the well of enthusiasm. And there is a great advantage in having a cultivated person at command, with whom one can chat of any topic under the sun. I repeat, you have no need of town if you have friends like Laetitia Dale within call. My mother esteemed her highly.'

'Willoughby, she is not obliged to go.'

'I hope not. And, my love, I rejoice that you have taken to her. Her father's health is poor. She would be a young spinster to live alone in a country cottage.'

'What of your scheme?'

'Old Vernon is a very foolish fellow.'

'He has declined?'

'Not a word on the subject! I have only to propose it to be snubbed, I know.'

'You may not be aware how you throw him into the shade with her.'

'Nothing seems to teach him the art of dialogue with ladies.'

'Are not gentlemen shy when they see themselves outshone?'

'He hasn't it, my love: Vernon is deficient in the lady's tongue.'

'I respect him for that.'

'Outshone, you say? I do not know of any shining – save to one, who lights me, path and person!'

The identity of the one was conveyed to her in a bow and a soft pressure.

'Not only has he not the lady's tongue, which I hold to be a man's proper accomplishment,' continued Sir Willoughby, 'he cannot turn his advantages to account. Here has Miss Dale been with him now four days in the house. They are exactly on the same footing as when she entered it. You ask? I will tell you. It is this: it is want of warmth. Old Vernon is a scholar – and a fish. Well, perhaps he has cause to be shy of matrimony; but he is a fish.'

'You are reconciled to his leaving you?'

'False alarm! The resolution to do anything unaccustomed is quite beyond old Vernon.'

'But if Mr Oxford – Whitford… your swans coming sailing up the lake, how beautiful they look when they are indignant! I was going to ask you, surely men witnessing a marked admiration for some one else will naturally be discouraged?'

Sir Willoughby stiffened with sudden enlightenment. Though the word jealousy had not been spoken, the drift of her observations was clear. Smiling inwardly, he said, and the sentences were not enigmas to her: 'Surely, too, young ladies… a little? – Too far? But an old friendship! About the same as the fitting of an old glove to a hand. Hand and glove have only to meet. Where there is natural harmony you would not have discord. Ay, but you have it if you check the harmony. My dear girl! You child!'

He had actually, in this parabolic, and commendable, obscureness, for which she thanked him in her soul, struck the very point she had not named and did not wish to hear named, but wished him to strike; he was anything but obtuse. His exultation, of the compressed sort, was extreme, on hearing her cry out:

'Young ladies may be. Oh! not I, not I! I can convince you. Not that. Believe me, Willoughby. I do not know what it is to feel that, or anything like it. I cannot conceive a claim on any one's life – as a claim: or the continuation of an engagement not founded on perfect, *perfect* sympathy. How should I feel it, then? It is, as you say of Mr Ox – Whitford, beyond me.'

Sir Willoughby caught up the Ox – Whitford.

Bursting with laughter in his joyful pride, he called it a portrait of old Vernon in society. For she thought a trifle too highly of Vernon, as here and there a raw young lady does think of the friends of her plighted man, which is waste of substance properly belonging to him, as it were, in the loftier sense, an expenditure

in genuflexions to way-side idols of the reverence she should bring intact to the temple. Derision instructs her.

Of the other subject – her jealousy – he had no desire to hear more. She had winced: the woman had been touched to smarting in the girl: enough. She attempted the subject once, but faintly, and his careless parrying threw her out. Clara could have bitten her tongue for that reiterated stupid slip on the name of Whitford; and because she was innocent at heart she persisted in asking herself how she could be guilty of it.

'You both know the botanic titles of these wild flowers,' she said.

'Who?' he inquired.

'You and Miss Dale.'

Sir Willoughby shrugged. He was amused.

'No woman on earth will grace a barouche so exquisitely as my Clara.'

'Where?' said she.

'During our annual two months in London. I drive a barouche there, and venture to prophesy that my equipage will create the greatest excitement of any in London. I see old Horace De Craye gazing!'

She sighed. She could not drag him to the word, or a hint of it necessary to her subject.

But there it was; she saw it. She had nearly let it go, and blushed at being obliged to name it.

'Jealousy, do you mean, Willoughby? the people in London would be jealous? – Colonel De Craye? How strange! That is a sentiment I cannot understand.'

Sir Willoughby gesticulated the 'Of course not' of an established assurance to the contrary.

'Indeed, Willoughby, I do not.'

'Certainly not.'

He was now in her trap. And he was imagining himself to be anatomizing her feminine nature.

'Can I give you a proof, Willoughby? I am so utterly incapable of it that – listen to me – were you to come to me to tell me, as you might, how much better suited to you Miss Dale has appeared than I am – and I fear I am not; it should be spoken plainly; unsuited altogether, perhaps – I would, I beseech you to believe – you must believe me – give you… give you your freedom instantly; most truly; and engage to speak of you as I should think of you. Willoughby, you would have no one to praise you in public and in private as I should, for you would be to me the most honest, truthful, chivalrous gentleman alive. And in that case I would undertake to declare that she would not admire you more than I; Miss Dale would not; she would not admire you more than I; not even Miss Dale.'

This, her first direct leap for liberty, set Clara panting, and so much had she to say that the nervous and the intellectual halves of her clashed like cymbals, dazing and stunning her with the appositeness of things to be said, and dividing her in indecision as to the cunningest to move him of the many pressing.

The condition of feminine jealousy stood revealed.

He had driven her farther than he intended.

'Come, let me allay these…' he soothed her with hand and voice, while seeking for his phrase; 'these magnified pinpoints. Now, my Clara! on my honour! and when I put it forward in attestation, my honour has the most serious meaning speech can have; ordinarily my word has to suffice for bonds, promises, or asseverations; on my honour! not merely is there, my poor child! no ground of suspicion, I assure you, I declare to you, the fact of the case is the very reverse. Now, mark me; of her sentiments I cannot pretend to speak; I did not, to my knowledge, originate, I am not responsible for them, and I am, before the law, as we will say, ignorant of them; that is, I have never heard a declaration of them, and I am, therefore, under pain of the stigma of excessive fatuity, bound to be non-cognizant. But as to myself, I can speak for myself, and, on my honour! Clara – to be as direct as possible, even to baldness, and you know I loathe it – I could not, I repeat, *I could not marry Laetitia Dale!* Let me impress it on you. No flatteries – we are all susceptible more or less – no conceivable condition could bring it about; no amount of admiration. She and I are excellent friends; we cannot be more. When you see us together, the natural concord of our minds is of course misleading. She is a woman of genius. I do not conceal, I profess my admiration of her. There are times when, I confess, I require a Laetitia Dale to bring me out, give and take. I am indebted to her for the enjoyment of the duet few know, few can accord with, fewer still are allowed the privilege of playing with a human being. I am indebted, I own, and I feel deep gratitude; I own to a lively friendship for Miss Dale, but if she is displeasing in the sight of my bride by… the breadth of an eyelash, then…'

Sir Willoughby's arm waved Miss Dale off away into outer darkness in the wilderness.

Clara shut her eyes and rolled her eyeballs in a frenzy of unuttered revolt from the Egoist.

But she was not engaged in the colloquy to be an advocate of Miss Dale or of common humanity.

'Ah!' she said, simply determining that the subject should not drop.

'And, ah!' he mocked her tenderly. 'True, though! And who knows better than my Clara that I require youth, health, beauty, and the other undefinable attributes fitting with mine and beseeming the station of the lady called to preside over my household and represent me? What says my other self? my fairer? But you are! my love, you are! Understand my nature rightly, and you…'

'I do! I do!' interposed Clara; 'if I did not by this time I should be idiotic. Let me assure you, I understand it. Oh, listen to me; one moment! Miss Dale regards me as the happiest woman on earth. Willoughby, if I possessed her good qualities, her heart and mind, no doubt I should be. It is my wish – you must hear me, hear me out – my wish, my earnest wish, my burning prayer, my wish to make way for her. She appreciates you: I do not – to my shame, I do not. She worships you: I do not, I cannot. You are the rising sun to her. It has been so for years. No one can account for love; I daresay not for the impossibility of loving… loving where we should; all love bewilders me. I was not created to understand it. But she loves you, she has pined. I believe it has destroyed the health you demand as one item in your list. But you, Willoughby, can restore that. Travelling, and… and your society, the pleasure of your society would certainly restore it. You look so handsome together! She has unbounded devotion! as for me, I cannot idolize. I see faults: I see them daily. They astonish and wound me. Your pride would not bear to hear them spoken of, least of all by your wife. You warned me to beware – that is, you said – you said something.'

Her busy brain missed the subterfuge to cover her slip of the tongue.

Sir Willoughby struck in: 'And when I say that the entire concatenation is based on an erroneous observation of facts, and an erroneous deduction from that erroneous observation! – ? No, no. Have confidence in me. I propose it to you in this instance, purely to save you from deception. You are cold, my love? you shivered.'

'I am not cold,' said Clara. 'Some one, I suppose, was walking over my grave.'

The gulf of a caress hove in view like an enormous billow hollowing under the curled ridge.

She stooped to a buttercup; the monster swept by.

'Your grave!' he exclaimed over her head; 'my own girl!'

'Is not the orchis naturally a stranger in ground so far away from the chalk, Willoughby?'

'I am incompetent to pronounce an opinion on such important matters. My mother had a passion for every description of flower. I fancy I have some recollection of her scattering the flower you mention over the park.'

'If she were living now!'

'We should be happy in the blessing of the most estimable of women, my Clara.'

'She would have listened to me. She would have realized what I mean.'

'Indeed, Clara – poor soul!' he murmured to himself, aloud; 'indeed you are absolutely in error. If I have seemed –but I repeat, you are deceived. The idea of "fitness" is a total hallucination. Supposing you – I do it even in play painfully –entirely out of the way, unthought of…'

'Extinct,' Clara said low.

'Non-existent for me,' he selected a preferable term. 'Suppose it; I should still, in spite of an admiration I have never thought it incumbent on me to conceal, still be – I speak emphatically – *utterly incapable of the offer of my hand to Miss Dale.* It may be that she is imbedded in my mind as a friend, and nothing but a friend. I received the stamp in early youth. People have noticed it – we do, it seems, bring one another out, reflecting, counter-reflecting.'

She glanced up at him with a shrewd satisfaction to see that her wicked shaft had stuck.

'You do; it is a common remark,' she said. 'The instantaneous difference when she comes near, any one might notice.'

'My love,' he opened the iron gate into the garden, 'you encourage the naughty little suspicion.'

'But it is a beautiful sight, Willoughby. I like to see you together. I like it as I like to see colours match.'

'Very well. There is no harm then. We shall often be together. I like my fair friend. But the instant! – you have only to express a sentiment of disapprobation.'

'And you dismiss her.'

'I dismiss her. That is, as to the word, I constitute myself your echo, to clear any vestige of suspicion. She goes.'

'That is a case of a person doomed to extinction without offending.'

‘Not without: for whoever offends my bride, my wife, my sovereign lady, offends me: very deeply offends me.’

‘Then the caprices of your wife –’ Clara stamped her foot imperceptibly on the lawn-sward, which was irresponsively soft to her fretfulness. She broke from the inconsequent meaningless mild tone of irony, and said: ‘Willoughby, women have their honour to swear by equally with men: – girls have: they have to swear an oath at the altar; may I to you now? Take it for uttered when I tell you that nothing would make me happier than your union with Miss Dale. I have spoken as much as I can. Tell me you release me.’

With the well-known screw-smile of duty upholding weariness worn to inanition, he rejoined: ‘Allow me once more to reiterate, that it is repulsive, inconceivable, that I should *ever, under any mortal conditions, bring myself to the point of taking Miss Dale for my wife*. You reduce me to this perfectly childish protestation – pitiably childish! But, my love, have I to remind you that you and I are plighted, and that I am an honourable man?’

‘I know it, I feel it – release me!’ cried Clara.

Sir Willoughby severely reprehended his short-sightedness for seeing but the one proximate object in the particular attention he had bestowed on Miss Dale. He could not disavow that they had been marked, and with an object, and he was distressed by the unwonted want of wisdom through which he had been drawn to overshoot his object. His design to excite a touch of the insane emotion in Clara’s bosom was too successful, and, ‘I was not thinking of her,’ he said to himself in his candour, contrite.

She cried again: ‘Will you not, Willoughby – release me?’

He begged her to take his arm.

To consent to touch him while petitioning for a detachment, appeared discordant to Clara, but, if she expected him to accede, it was right that she should do as much as she could, and she surrendered her hand at arm’s length, disdaining the imprisoned fingers. He pressed them and said: ‘Dr Middleton is in the library. I see Vernon is at work with Crossjay in the West-room – the boy has had sufficient for the day. Now, is it not like old Vernon to drive his books at a cracked head before it’s half mended?’

He signalled to young Crossjay, who was up and out through the folding-windows in a twinkling.

‘And you will go in, and talk to Vernon of the lady in question,’ Sir Willoughby whispered to Clara. ‘Use your best persuasions in our joint names. You have my warrant for saying that money is no consideration; house and income are assured. You can hardly have taken me seriously when I requested you to undertake Vernon before. I was quite in earnest then as now. I prepare Miss Dale. I will not have a wedding on *our* wedding-day; but either before or after it, I gladly speed their alliance. I think now I give you the best proof possible, and though I know that with women a delusion may be seen to be groundless and still be cherished, I rely on your good sense.’

Vernon was at the window and stood aside for her to enter. Sir Willoughby used a gentle insistence with her. She bent her head as if she were stepping into a cave. So frigid was she, that a ridiculous dread of calling Mr Whitford Mr Oxford was her only present anxiety when Sir Willoughby had closed the window on them.

CHAPTER 14

Sir Willoughby and Laetitia

‘I PREPARE Miss Dale.’

Sir Willoughby thought of his promise to Clara. He trifled awhile with young Crossjay, and then sent the boy flying, and wrapped himself in meditation. So shall you see standing many a statue of statesmen who have died in harness for their country.

In the hundred and fourth chapter of the thirteenth volume of the BOOK OF EGOISM it is written: *Possession without obligation to the object possessed approaches felicity.*

It is the rarest condition of ownership. For example: the possession of land is not without obligation both to the soil and the tax-collector; the possession of fine clothing is oppressed by obligation; gold, jewelry, works of art, enviable household furniture, are positive fetters; the possession of a wife we find surcharged with obligation. In all these cases possession is a gentle term for enslavement, bestowing the sort of felicity

attained to by the helot drunk. You can have the joy, the pride, the intoxication of possession; you can have no free soul.

But there is one instance of possession, and that the most perfect, which leaves us free, under not a shadow of obligation, receiving ever, never giving, or if giving, giving only of our waste; as it were (sauf votre respect), by form of perspiration, radiation, if you like; unconscious poral bountifulness; and it is a beneficent process for the system. Our possession of an adoring female's worship is this instance.

The soft cherishable Parsee is hardly at any season other than prostrate. She craves nothing save that you continue in being – her sun: which is your firm constitutional endeavour: and thus you have a most exact alliance; she supplying spirit to your matter, while at the same time presenting matter to your spirit, verily a comfortable apposition. The Gods do bless it.

That they do so indeed is evident in the men they select for such a felicitous crown and aureole. Weak men would be rendered nervous by the flattery of a woman's worship; or they would be for returning it, at least partially, as though it could be bandied to and fro without emulgence of the poetry; or they would be pitiful, and quite spoil the thing. Some would be for transforming the beautiful solitary vestal flame by the first effort of the multiplication-table into your hearth-fire of slippered affection. So these men are not they whom the Gods have ever selected, but rather men of a pattern with themselves, very high and very solid men, who maintain the crown by holding divinely independent of the great emotion they have sown.

Even for them a pass of danger is ahead, as we shall see in our sample of one among the highest of them.

A clear approach to felicity had long been the portion of Sir Willoughby Patterne in his relations with Laetitia Dale. She belonged to him; he was quite unshackled by her. She was everything that is good in a parasite, nothing that is bad. His dedicated critic she was, reviewing him with a favour equal to perfect efficiency in her office; and whatever the world might say of him, to her the happy gentleman could constantly turn for his refreshing balsamic bath. She flew to the soul in him, pleasingly arousing sensations of that inhabitant; and he allowed her the right to fly, in the manner of kings, as we have heard, consenting to the privileges acted on by cats. These may not address their Majesties, but they may stare; nor will it be contested that the attentive circular eyes of the humble domestic creatures are an embellishment to Royal pomp and grandeur, such truly as should one day gain for them an in-weaving and figurement – in the place of bees, ermine tufts, and their various present decorations – upon the august great robes back-flowing and foaming over the gaspy pageboys.

Further to quote from the same volume of THE BOOK: *There is pain in the surrendering of that we are fain to relinquish*.

The idea is too exquisitely attenuate, as are those of the whole body-guard of the heart of Egoism, and will slip through you unless you shall have made a study of the gross of volumes of the first and second sections of THE BOOK, and that will take you up to senility; or you must make a personal entry into the pages, perchance; or an escape out of them. There was once a venerable gentleman for whom a white hair grew on the cop of his nose, laughing at removals. He resigned himself to it in the end, and lastingly contemplated the apparition. It does not concern us what effect was produced on his countenance and his mind; enough that he saw a fine thing, but not so fine as the idea cited above; which has been between the two eyes of humanity ever since women were sought in marriage. With yonder old gentleman it may have been a ghostly hair or a disease of the optic nerves; but for us it is a real growth, and humanity might profitably imitate him in his patient speculation upon it.

Sir Willoughby Patterne, though ready in the pursuit of duty and policy (an oft-united couple) to cast Miss Dale away, had to consider that he was not simply, so to speak, casting her over a hedge, he was casting her for a man to catch her; and this was a much greater trial than it had been on the previous occasion, when she went over bump to the ground. In the arms of a husband, there was no knowing how soon she might forget her soul's fidelity. It had not hurt him to sketch the project of the conjunction; benevolence assisted him; but he winced and smarted on seeing it take shape. It sullied his idea of Laetitia.

Still, if, in spite of so great a change in her fortune, her spirit could be guaranteed changeless, he, for the sake of pacifying his bride, and to keep two serviceable persons near him at command, might resolve to join them. The vision of his resolution brought with it a certain pallid contempt of the physically faithless woman; no wonder he betook himself to THE BOOK, and opened it on the scorching chapters treating of the sex, and the execrable wiles of that foremost creature of the chase, who runs for life. She is not spared in the Biggest of Books. But close it.

The writing in it having been done chiefly by men, men naturally receive their fortification from its wisdom, and half a dozen of the popular sentences for the confusion of women (cut in brass worn to a polish like sombre gold), refreshed Sir Willoughby for his undertaking.

An examination of Laetitia's faded complexion braced him very cordially.

His Clara jealous of this poor leaf!

He could have desired the transfusion of a quality or two from Laetitia to his bride; but you cannot, as in cookery, obtain a mixture of the essences of these creatures; and if, as it is possible to do, and as he had been doing recently with the pair of them at the Hall, you stew them in one pot, you are far likelier to intensify their little birth-marks of individuality. Had they a tendency to excellence it might be otherwise; they might then make the exchanges we wish for; or scientifically concocted in a harem for a sufficient length of time by a sultan anything but obtuse, they might. It is, however, fruitless to dwell on what was only a glimpse of a wild regret, like the crossing of two express trains along the rails in Sir Willoughby's head.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel were sitting with Miss Dale, all three at work on embroideries. He had merely to look at Miss Eleanor. She rose. She looked at Miss Isabel, and rattled her châtelaine to account for her departure. After a decent interval Miss Isabel glided out. Such was the perfect discipline of the household.

Sir Willoughby played an air on the knee of his crossed leg.

Laetitia grew conscious of a meaning in the silence. She said, 'You have not been vexed by affairs to-day?'

'Affairs,' he replied, 'must be peculiarly vexatious to trouble me. Concerning the country or my personal affairs?'

'I fancy I was alluding to the country.'

'I trust I am as good a patriot as any man living,' said he; 'but I am used to the follies of my countrymen, and we are on board a stout ship. At the worst it's no worse than a rise in rates and taxes; soup at the Hall gates, perhaps; license to fell timber in one of the outer copses, or some dozen loads of coal. You hit my feudalism.'

'The knight in armour has gone,' said Laetitia, 'and the castle with the draw-bridge. Immunity for our island has gone too since we took to commerce.'

'We bartered independence for commerce. You hit our old controversy. Ay, but we do not want this overgrown population! However, we will put politics and sociology and the pack of their modern barbarous words aside. You read me intuitively. I have been, I will not say annoyed, but ruffled. I have much to do, and going into Parliament would make me almost helpless if I lose Vernon. You know of some absurd notion he has? – literary fame, and bachelor's chambers, and a chop-house, and the rest of it.'

She knew, and thinking differently in the matter of literary fame, she flushed, and, ashamed of the flush, frowned.

He bent over to her with the perusing earnestness of a gentleman about to trifle.

'You cannot intend that frown?'

'Did I frown?'

'You do.'

'Now?'

'Fiercely.'

'Oh!'

'Will you smile to reassure me?'

'Willingly, as well as I can.'

A gloom overcame him. With no woman on earth did he shine so as to recall to himself seigneur and dame of the old French Court as he did with Laetitia Dale. He did not wish the period revived, but reserved it as a garden to stray into when he was in the mood for displaying elegance and brightness in the society of a lady; and in speech Laetitia helped him to the nice delusion. She was not devoid of grace of bearing either.

Would she preserve her beautiful responsiveness to his ascendency? Hitherto she had, and for years, and quite fresh. But how of her as a married woman? Our souls are hideously subject to the conditions of our animal nature! A wife, possibly mother, it was within sober calculation that there would be great changes in her. And the hint of any change appeared a total change to one of the lofty order who, when they are called on to relinquish possession instead of aspiring to it, say, All or nothing!

Well, but if there was danger of the marriage-tie effecting the slightest alteration of her character or habit of mind, wherefore press it upon a tolerably hardened spinster!

Besides, though he did once put her hand in Vernon's for the dance, he remembered acutely that the injury then done by his generosity to his tender sensitiveness had sickened and tarnished the effulgence of two or three successive anniversaries of his coming of age. Nor had he altogether yet got over the passion of

greed for the whole group of the well-favoured of the fair sex, which in his early youth had made it bitter for him to submit to the fickleness, not to say the modest fickleness, of any handsome one of them in yielding her hand to a man and suffering herself to be led away. Ladies whom he had only heard of as ladies of some beauty incurred his wrath for having lovers or taking husbands. He was of a vast embrace; and do not exclaim, in covetousness; – for well he knew that even under Moslem law he could not have them all – but as the enamoured custodian of the sex's purity, that blushes at such big spots as lovers and husbands; and it was unbearable to see it sacrificed for others. Without their purity what are they! – what are fruiterer's plums? – unsaleable. Oh, for the bloom on them!

'As I said, I lose my right hand in Vernon,' he resumed, 'and I am, it seems, inevitably to lose him, unless we contrive to fasten him down here. I think, my dear Miss Dale, you have my character. At least, I should recommend my future biographer to you – with a caution, of course. You would have to write selfishness with a dash under it. I cannot endure to lose a member of my household – not under any circumstances; and a change of feeling toward me on the part of any of my friends because of marriage, I think hard. I would ask you, how can it be for Vernon's good to quit an easy pleasant home for the wretched profession of Literature? – wretchedly paying, I mean,' he bowed to the authoress. 'Let him leave the house, if he imagines he will not harmonize with its young mistress. He is queer, though a good fellow. But he ought, in that event, to have an establishment. And my scheme for Vernon – men, Miss Dale, do not change to their old friends when they marry – my scheme, which would cause the alteration in his system of life to be barely perceptible, is to build him a poetical little cottage, large enough for a couple, on the borders of my park. I have the spot in my eye. The point is, can he live alone there? Men, I say, do not change. How is it that we cannot say the same of women?'

Laetitia remarked: 'The generic woman appears to have an extraordinary faculty for swallowing the individual.'

'As to the individual, as to a particular person, I may be wrong. Precisely because it is her case I think of, my strong friendship inspires the fear: unworthy of both, no doubt, but trace it to the source. Even pure friendship, such is the taint in us, knows a kind of jealousy; though I would gladly see her established, and near me, happy and contributing to my happiness with her incomparable social charm. Her I do not estimate generically, be sure.'

'If you do me the honour to allude to me, Sir Willoughby,' said Laetitia, 'I am my father's housemate.'

'What wooer would take that for a refusal? He would beg to be a third in the house and sharer of your affectionate burden. Honestly, why not? And I may be arguing against my own happiness; it may be the end of me!'

'The end?'

'Old friends are captious, exacting. No, not the end. Yet if my friend is not the same to me, it is the end to that form of friendship: not to the degree possibly. But when one is used to the form! And do you, in its application to friendship, scorn the word "use"? We are creatures of custom. I am, I confess, a poltroon in my affections; I dread changes. The shadow of the tenth of an inch in the customary elevation of an eyelid! – to give you an idea of my susceptibility. And, my dear Miss Dale, I throw myself on your charity, with all my weakness bare, let me add, as I could do to none but you. Consider, then, if I lose you! The fear is due to my pusillanimity entirely. High-souled women may be wives, mothers and still reserve that home for their friend. They can and will conquer the viler conditions of human life. Our states, I have always contended, our various phases have to be passed through, and there is no disgrace in it so long as they do not levy toll on the quintessential, the spiritual element. You understand me? I am no adept in these abstract elucidations.'

'You explain yourself clearly,' said Laetitia.

'I have never pretended that psychology was my forte,' said he, feeling overshadowed by her cold commendation: he was not less acutely sensitive to the fractional divisions of tones than of eyelids, being, as it were, a melody with which everything was out of tune that did not modestly or mutely accord; and to bear about a melody in your person is incomparably more searching than the best of touchstones and talismans ever invented. 'Your father's health has improved latterly?'

'He did not complain of his health when I saw him this morning. My cousin Amelia is with him, and she is an excellent nurse.'

'He has a liking for Vernon.'

'He has a great respect for Mr Whitford.'

'You have?'

'Oh, yes; I have it equally.'

‘For a foundation, that is the surest. I would have the friends dearest to me begin on that. The headlong match is –! how can we describe it? By its finale I am afraid. Vernon’s abilities are really to be respected. His shyness is his malady. I suppose he reflected that he was not a capitalist. He might, one would think, have addressed himself to me; my purse is not locked.’

‘No, Sir Willoughby!’ Laetitia said, warmly, for his donations in charity were famous.

Her eyes gave him the food he enjoyed, and basking in them, he continued:

‘Vernon’s income would at once have been regulated commensurately with a new position requiring an increase. This money, money, money! But the world will have it so. Happily I have inherited habits of business and personal economy. Vernon is a man who would do fifty times more with a companion appreciating his abilities and making light of his little deficiencies. They are palpable, small enough. He has always been aware of my wishes: – when perhaps the fulfilment might have sent me off on another tour of the world, home-bird though I am. When was it that our friendship commenced? In my boyhood, I know. Very many years back.’

‘I am in my thirtieth year,’ said Laetitia.

Surprised and pained by a baldness resembling the deeds of ladies (they have been known, either through absence of mind, or mania, to displace a wig) in the deadly intimacy which slaughters poetic admiration, Sir Willoughby punished her by deliberately reckoning that she did not look less.

‘Genius,’ he observed, ‘is unacquainted with wrinkles’; hardly one of his prettiest speeches; but he had been wounded, and he never could recover immediately. Coming on him in a mood of sentiment, the wound was sharp. He could very well have calculated the lady’s age. It was the jarring clash of her brazen declaration of it upon his low rich flute-notes that shocked him.

He glanced at the gold cathedral-clock on the mantel-piece, and proposed a stroll on the lawn before dinner. Laetitia gathered up her embroidery work.

‘As a rule,’ he said, ‘authoresses are not needle-women.’

‘I shall resign the needle or the pen if it stamps me an exception,’ she replied.

He attempted a compliment on her truly exceptional character. As when the player’s finger rests in distraction on the organ, it was without measure and disgusted his own hearing. Nevertheless, she had been so good as to diminish his apprehension that the marriage of a lady in her thirtieth year with his cousin Vernon would be so much of a loss to him; hence, while parading the lawn, now and then casting an eye at the window of the room where his Clara and Vernon were in council, the schemes he indulged for his prospective comfort and his feelings of the moment were in such striving harmony as that to which we hear orchestral musicians bringing their instruments under the process called tuning. It is not perfect, but it promises to be so soon. We are not angels, which have their dulcimers ever on the choral pitch. We are mortals attaining the celestial accord with effort, through a stage of pain. Some degree of pain was necessary to Sir Willoughby, otherwise he would not have seen his generosity confronting him. He grew, therefore, tenderly inclined to Laetitia once more, so far as to say within himself, ‘For conversation she would be a valuable wife’. And this valuable wife he was presenting to his cousin.

Apparently, considering the duration of the conference of his Clara and Vernon, his cousin required strong persuasion to accept the present.

CHAPTER 15

The Petition for a Release

NEITHER Clara nor Vernon appeared at the mid-day table. Dr Middleton talked with Miss Dale on classical matters, like a good-natured giant giving a child the jump from stone to stone across a brawling mountain ford, so that an unedified audience might really suppose, upon seeing her over the difficulty, she had done something for herself. Sir Willoughby was proud of her, and therefore anxious to settle her business while he was in the humour to lose her. He hoped to finish it by shooting a word or two at Vernon before dinner. Clara’s petition to be set free, released from *him*, had vaguely frightened even more than it offended his pride.

Miss Isabel quitted the room.

She came back, saying: ‘They decline to lunch.’

‘Then we may rise,’ remarked Sir Willoughby.

‘She was weeping,’ Miss Isabel murmured to him.

‘Girlish enough,’ he said.

The two elderly ladies went away together. Miss Dale, pursuing her theme with the Rev. Doctor, was invited by him to a course in the library. Sir Willoughby walked up and down the lawn, taking a glance at the West-room as he swung round on the turn of his leg. Growing impatient, he looked in at the window and found the room vacant.

Nothing was to be seen of Clara and Vernon during the afternoon. Near the dinner-hour the ladies were informed by Miss Middleton’s maid that her mistress was lying down on her bed, too unwell with headache to be present. Young Crossjay brought a message from Vernon (delayed by birds’ eggs in the delivery), to say that he was off over the hills, and thought of dining with Dr Corney.

Sir Willoughby despatched condolences to his bride. He was not well able to employ his mind on its customary topic, being, like the dome of a bell, a man of so pervading a ring within himself concerning himself, that the recollection of a doubtful speech or unpleasant circumstance touching him closely deranged his inward peace; and as dubious and unpleasant things will often occur, he had great need of a worshipper, and was often compelled to appeal to her for signs of antidotal idolatry. In this instance, when the need of a worshipper was sharply felt, he obtained no signs at all. The Rev. Doctor had fascinated Miss Dale; so that, both within and without, Sir Willoughby was uncomforted. His themes in public were those of an English gentleman; horses, dogs, game, sport, intrigue, scandal, politics, wines, the manly themes; with a condescension to ladies’ tattle, and approbation of a racy anecdote. What interest could he possibly take in the Athenian Theatre and the girl whose flute-playing behind the scenes, imitating the nightingale, enraptured a Greek audience! He would have suspected a motive in Miss Dale’s eager attentiveness, if the motive could have been conceived. Besides, the ancients were not decorous; they did not, as we make our moderns do, write for ladies. He ventured at the dinner-table to interrupt Dr Middleton once:

‘Miss Dale will do wisely, I think, sir, by confining herself to your present edition of the classics.’

‘That,’ replied Dr Middleton, ‘is the observation of a student of the dictionary of classical mythology in the English tongue.’

‘The theatre is a matter of climate, sir. You will grant me that.’

‘If quick wits come of climate, it is as you say, sir.’

‘With us it seems a matter of painful fostering, or the need of it,’ said Miss Dale, with a question to Dr Middleton, excluding Sir Willoughby, as though he had been a temporary disturbance of the flow of their dialogue.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel, previously excellent listeners to the learned talk, saw the necessity of coming to his rescue; but you cannot converse with your aunts, inmates of your house, on general subjects at table; the attempt increased his discomposure; he considered that he had ill-chosen his father-in-law; that scholars are an impolite race; that young or youngish women are devotees of power in any form, and will be absorbed by a scholar for a variation of a man; concluding that he must have a round of dinner-parties to friends, especially ladies, appreciating him, during the Doctor’s visit. Clara’s headache above, and Dr Middleton’s unmannerliness below, affected his instincts in a way to make him apprehend that a stroke of misfortune was impending; thunder was in the air. Still he learned something, by which he was to profit subsequently. The topic of wine withdrew the doctor from his classics; it was magical on him. A strong fraternity of taste was discovered in the sentiments of host and guest upon particular wines and vintages; they kindled one another by naming great years of the grape, and if Sir Willoughby had to sacrifice the ladies to the topic, he much regretted a condition of things that compelled him to sin against his habit, for the sake of being in the conversation and probing an elderly gentleman’s foible.

Late at night he heard the house-bell, and meeting Vernon in the hall, invited him to enter the laboratory and tell him Dr Corney’s last. Vernon was brief; Corney had not let fly a single anecdote, he said, and lighted his candle.

‘By the way, Vernon, you had a talk with Miss Middleton?’

‘She will speak to you to-morrow at twelve.’

‘To-morrow at twelve?’

‘It gives her four-and-twenty hours.’

Sir Willoughby determined that his perplexity should be seen; but Vernon said good-night to him, and was shooting up the stairs before the dramatic exhibition of surprise had yielded to speech.

Thunder was in the air and a blow coming. Sir Willoughby's instincts were awake to the many signs, nor, though silenced, were they hushed by his harping on the frantic excesses to which women are driven by the passion of jealousy. He believed in Clara's jealousy because he really had intended to rouse it; under the form of emulation, feebly. He could not suppose she had spoken of it to Vernon. And as for the seriousness of her desire to be released from her engagement, that was little credible. Still the fixing of an hour for her to speak to him after an interval of four-and-twenty hours, left an opening for the incredible to add its weight to the suspicious mass; and who would have fancied Clara Middleton so wild a victim of the intemperate passion! He muttered to himself several assuaging observations to excuse a young lady half demented, and rejected them in a lump for their nonsensical inapplicability to Clara. In order to obtain some sleep, he consented to blame himself slightly, in the style of the enamoured historian of erring beauties alluding to their peccadilloes. He had done it to edify her. Sleep, however, failed him. That an inordinate jealousy argued an overpowering love, solved his problem until he tried to fit the proposition to Clara's character. He had discerned nothing southern in her. Latterly, with the blushing Day in prospect, she had contracted and frozen. There was no reading either of her or of the mystery.

In the morning, at the breakfast-table, a confession of sleeplessness was general. Excepting Miss Dale and Dr Middleton, none had slept a wink. 'I, sir,' the Doctor replied to Sir Willoughby, 'slept like a lexicon in your library when Mr Whitford and I are out of it.'

Vernon incidentally mentioned that he had been writing through the night.

'You fellows kill yourselves,' Sir Willoughby reproved him. 'For my part, I make it a principle to get through my work without self-slaughter.'

Clara watched her father for a symptom of ridicule. He gazed mildly on the systematic worker. She was unable to guess whether she would have in him an ally or a judge. The latter, she feared. Now that she had embraced the strife, she saw the division of the line where she stood from that one where the world places girls who are affianced wives; her father could hardly be with her; it had gone too far. He loved her, but he would certainly take her to be moved by a maddish whim; he would not try to understand her case. The scholar's detestation of a disarrangement of human affairs that had been by miracle contrived to run smoothly, would of itself rank him against her; and with the world to back his view of her, he might behave like a despotic father. How could she defend herself before him? At one thought of Sir Willoughby, her tongue made ready, and feminine craft was alert to prompt it; but to her father she could imagine herself opposing only dumbness and obstinacy.

'It is not exactly the same kind of work,' she said.

Dr Middleton rewarded her with a bushy eyebrow's beam of his revolting humour at the baronet's notion of work.

So little was needed to quicken her that she sunned herself in the beam, coaxing her father's eyes to stay with hers as long as she could, and beginning to hope he might be won to her side, if she confessed she had been more in the wrong than she felt; owned to him, that is, her error in not earlier disturbing his peace.

'I do not say it is the same,' observed Sir Willoughby, bowing to their alliance of opinion. 'My poor work is for the day, and Vernon's, no doubt, for the day to come. I contend, nevertheless, for the preservation of health as the chief implement of work.'

'Of continued work; there I agree with you,' said Dr Middleton, cordially.

Clara's heart sunk; so little was needed to deaden her.

Accuse her of an overweening antagonism to her betrothed; yet remember that though the words had not been uttered to give her good reason for it, nature reads nature; captives may be stript of everything save that power to read their tyrant; remember also that she was not, as she well knew, blameless; her rage at him was partly against herself.

The rising from table left her to Sir Willoughby. She swam away after Miss Dale, exclaiming: 'The laboratory! Will you have me for a companion on your walk to see your father? One breathes earth and heaven to-day out of doors. Isn't it Summer with a Spring Breeze? I will wander about your garden and not hurry your visit, I promise.'

'I shall be very happy indeed. But I am going immediately,' said Laetitia, seeing Sir Willoughby hovering to snap up his bride.

'Yes; and a garden-hat and I am on the march.'

'I will wait for you on the terrace.'

'You will not have to wait.'

'Five minutes at the most,' Sir Willoughby said to Laetitia, and she passed out, leaving them alone together.

‘Well, and my love!’ he addressed his bride almost huggingly; ‘and what is the story? and how did you succeed with old Vernon yesterday? He will and he won’t? He’s a very woman in these affairs. I can’t forgive him for giving you a headache. You were found weeping.’

‘Yes, I cried,’ said Clara.

‘And now tell me about it. You know, my dear girl, whether he does or doesn’t, our keeping him somewhere in the neighbourhood – perhaps not in the house – that is the material point. It can hardly be necessary in these days to urge marriages on. I’m sure the country is over… Most marriages ought to be celebrated with the funeral knell!’

‘I think so,’ said Clara.

‘It will come to this, that marriages of consequence, and none but those, will be hailed with joyful peals.’

‘Do not say such things in public, Willoughby.’

‘Only to you, to you! Don’t think me likely to expose myself to the world. Well, and I sounded Miss Dale, and there will be no violent obstacle. And now about Vernon?’

‘I will speak to you, Willoughby, when I return from my walk with Miss Dale, soon after twelve.’

‘Twelve!’ said he.

‘I name an hour. It seems childish. I can explain it. But it is named, I cannot deny, because I am a rather childish person perhaps, and have it prescribed to me to delay my speaking for a certain length of time. I may tell you at once that Mr Whitford is not to be persuaded by me, and the breaking of our engagement would not induce him to remain.’

‘Vernon used those words?’

‘It was I.’

‘ “The breaking of our engagement!” Come into the laboratory my love.’

‘I shall not have time.’

‘Time shall stop rather than interfere with our conversation! “The breaking…!” But it’s a sort of sacrilege to speak of it.’

‘That I feel; yet it has to be spoken of.’

‘Sometimes? Why? I can’t conceive the occasion. You know, to me, Clara, plighted faith, the affiancing of two lovers, is a piece of religion. I rank it as holy as marriage; nay, to me it is holier; I really cannot tell you how; I can only appeal to you in your bosom to understand me. We read of divorces with comparative indifference. They occur between couples who have rubbed off all romance.’

She could have asked him in her fit of ironic iciness, on hearing him thus blindly challenge her to speak out, whether the romance might be his piece of religion.

He propitiated the more unwar-like sentiments in her by ejaculating, ‘Poor souls! let them go their several ways. Married people no longer lovers are in the category of the un-nameable. But the hint of the breaking of an engagement – our engagement! – between *us*? Oh!’

‘Oh!’ Clara came out with a swan’s note swelling over mechanical imitation of him to dolorousness illimitable. ‘Oh!’ she breathed short, ‘let it be now. Do not speak till you have heard me. My head may not be clear by-and-by. And two scenes – twice will be beyond my endurance. I am penitent for the wrong I have done you. I grieve for you. All the blame is mine. Willoughby, you must release me. Do not let me hear a word of that word; jealousy is unknown to me… Happy if I could call you friend and see you with a worthier than I, who might by-and-by call me friend! You have my plighted troth… given in ignorance of my feelings. Reprobate a weak and foolish girl’s ignorance. I have thought of it, and I cannot see wickedness, though the blame is great, shameful. You have none. You are without any blame. You will not suffer as I do. You will be generous to me? I have no respect for myself when I beg you to be generous and release me.’

‘But was this the…’ Willoughby preserved his calmness, ‘this, then, the subject of your interview with Vernon?’

‘I have spoken to him. I did my commission, and I spoke to him.’

‘Of me?’

‘Of myself. I see how I hurt you; I could not avoid it. Yes, of you, as far as we are related. I said I believed you would release me. I said I could be true to my plighted word, but that you would not insist. Could a gentleman insist? But not a step beyond; not love; I have none. And, Willoughby, treat me as one perfectly worthless; I am. I should have known it a year back. I was deceived in myself. There should be love.’

‘Should be!’ Willoughby’s tone was a pungent comment on her.

‘Love, then, I find I have not. I think I am antagonistic to it. What people say of it I have not experienced.

I find I was mistaken. It is lightly said, but very painful. You understand me, that my prayer is for liberty, that I may not be tied. If you can release and pardon me, or promise ultimately to pardon me, or say some kind word, I shall know it is because I am beneath you utterly that I have been unable to give you the love you should have with a wife. Only say to me, go! It is you who break the match, discovering my want of a heart. What people think of me matters little. My anxiety will be to save you annoyance.'

She waited for him; he seemed on the verge of speaking.

He perceived her expectation; he had nothing but clownish tumult within, and his dignity counselled him to disappoint her.

Swaying his head, like the Oriental palm whose shade is a blessing to the perfervid wanderer below, smiling gravely, he was indirectly asking his dignity what he could say to maintain it and deal this mad young woman a bitterly compassionate rebuke. What to think, hung remoter. The thing to do struck him first.

He squeezed both her hands, threw the door wide open, and said, with countless blinkings: 'In the laboratory we are uninterrupted. I was at a loss to guess where that most unpleasant effect on the senses came from. They are always "guessing" through the nose. I mean, the remainder of breakfast here. Perhaps I satirized them too smartly – if you know the letters. When they are not "calculating". More offensive than débris of a midnight banquet! An American tour is instructive, though not so romantic. Not so romantic as Italy, I mean. Let us escape.'

She held back from his arm. She had scattered his brains; it was pitiable: but she was in the torrent and could not suffer a pause or a change of place.

'It must be here; one minute more – I cannot go elsewhere to begin again. Speak to me here; answer my request. Once; one word. If you forgive me, it will be superhuman. But, release me.'

'Seriously,' he rejoined, 'tea-cups and coffee-cups, breadcrumbs, egg-shells, caviare, butter, beef, bacon! Can we? The room reeks.'

'Then I will go for my walk with Miss Dale. And you will speak to me when I return?'

'At all seasons. You shall go with Miss Dale. But, my dear! my love! Seriously, where are we? One hears of lovers' quarrels. Now I never quarrel. It is a characteristic of mine. And you speak of me to my cousin Vernon! Seriously, plighted faith signifies plighted faith, as much as an iron-cable is iron to hold by. Some little twist of the mind? To Vernon, of all men! Tush! she has been dreaming of a hero of perfection, and the comparison is unfavourable to her Willoughby. But, my Clara, when I say to you, that bride is bride, and you are mine, mine!'

'Willoughby, you mentioned them, – those separations of two married. You said, if they do not love – Oh! say, is it not better – instead of later?'

He took advantage of her modesty in speaking to exclaim: 'Where are we now? Bride is bride, and wife is wife, and *affianced* is, in honour, *wedded*. You cannot be released. We are united. Recognize it; united. There is no possibility of releasing a wife!'

'Not if she ran…?'

This was too direct to be histrionically misunderstood. He had driven her to the extremity of more distinctly imagining the circumstance she had cited, and with that cleared view the desperate creature gloried in launching such a bolt at the man's real or assumed insensibility as must, by shivering it, waken him.

But in a moment she stood in burning rose, with dimmed eyesight. She saw his horror, and, seeing, shared it; shared just then only by seeing it; which led her to rejoice with the deepest of sighs that some shame was left in her.

'Ran? ran? ran?' he said as rapidly as he blinked. 'How? where? what idea…?'

Close was he upon an explosion that would have sullied his conception of the purity of the younger members of the sex hauntingly.

That she, a young lady, maiden, of strictest education, should, and without his teaching, know that wives ran! – know that by running they compelled their husbands to abandon pursuit, surrender possession! – and that she should suggest it of herself as a wife! – that she should speak of running!

His ideal, the common male Egoist ideal of a waxwork sex, would have been shocked to fragments had she spoken further to fill in the outlines of these awful interjections.

She was tempted: for during the last few minutes the fire of her situation had enlightened her understanding upon a subject far from her as the ice-fields of the North a short while before; and the prospect offered to her courage if she would only outstare shame and seem at home in the doings of

wickedness, was his loathing and dreading so vile a young woman. She restrained herself; chiefly, after the first bridling of maidenly timidity, because she could not bear to lower the idea of her sex even in his esteem.

The door was open. She had thoughts of flying out to breathe in an interval of truce.

She reflected on her situation hurriedly askance:

'If one must go through this, to be disentangled from an engagement, what must it be to poor women seeking to be free of a marriage?'

Had she spoken it, Sir Willoughby might have learned that she was not so iniquitously wise of the things of this world as her mere sex's instinct, roused to the intemperateness of a creature struggling with fetters, had made her appear in her dash to seize a weapon, indicated moreover by him.

Clara took up the old broken vow of women to vow it afresh: 'Never to any man will I give my hand.'

She replied to Sir Willoughby, 'I have said all. I cannot explain what I have said.'

She had heard a step in the passage. Vernon entered.

Perceiving them, he stated his mission in apology: 'Doctor Middleton left a book in this room. I see it; it's a Heinsius.'

'Ha! by the way, a book; books would not be left here if they were not brought here, with my compliments to Doctor Middleton, who may do as he pleases, though, seriously, order is order,' said Sir Willoughby. 'Come away to the laboratory, Clara. It's a comment on human beings that wherever they have been there's a mess, and you admirers of them,' he divided a sickly nod between Vernon and the stale breakfast-table, 'must make what you can of it. Come, Clara.'

Clara protested that she was engaged to walk with Miss Dale.

'Miss Dale is waiting in the hall,' said Vernon.

'Miss Dale is waiting?' said Clara.

'Walk with Miss Dale; walk with Miss Dale,' Sir Willoughby remarked, pressingly. 'I will beg her to wait another two minutes. You shall find her in the hall when you come down.'

He rang the bell and went out.

'Take Miss Dale into your confidence; she is quite trustworthy,' Vernon said to Clara.

'I have not advanced one step,' she replied.

'Recollect that you are in a position of your own choosing; and if, after thinking over it, you mean to escape, you must make up your mind to pitched battles, and not be dejected if you are beaten in all of them; there is your only chance.'

'Not my choosing; do not say choosing, Mr Whitford. I did not choose. I was incapable of really choosing. I consented.'

'It's the same in fact. But be sure of what you wish.'

'Yes,' she assented, taking it for her just punishment that she should be supposed not quite to know her wishes. 'Your advice has helped me to-day.'

'Did I advise?'

'Do you regret advising?'

'I should certainly regret a word that intruded between you and him.'

'But you will not leave the Hall yet? You will not leave me without a friend? If papa and I were to leave to-morrow, I foresee endless correspondence. I have to stay at least some days, and wear through it, and then, if I have to speak to my poor father, you can imagine the effect on him.'

Sir Willoughby came striding in, to correct the error of his going out.

'Miss Dale awaits you, my dear. You have bonnet, hat? – No? Have you forgotten your appointment to walk with her?'

'I am ready,' said Clara, departing.

The two gentlemen behind her separated in the passage. They had not spoken.

She had read of the reproach upon women, that they divide the friendships of men. She reproached herself, but she was in action, driven by necessity, between sea and rock. Dreadful to think of! she was one of the creatures who are written about.

CHAPTER 16

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Clara and Laetitia

IN spite of his honourable caution, Vernon had said things to render Miss Middleton more angrily determined than she had been in the scene with Sir Willoughby. His counting on pitched battles and a defeat for her in all of them, made her previous feelings appear slack in comparison with the energy of combat now animating her. And she could vehemently declare that she had not chosen; she was too young, too ignorant to choose. He had wrongly used that word; it sounded malicious; and to call consenting the same in fact as choosing was wilfully unjust. Mr Whitford meant well; he was conscientious, very conscientious. But he was not the hero descending from heaven bright-sworded to smite a woman's fetters off her limbs and deliver her from the yawning mouth-abyss.

His logical coolness of expostulation with her when she cast aside the silly mission entrusted to her by Sir Willoughby and wept for herself, was unheroic in proportion to its praiseworthiness. He had left it to her to do everything she wished done, stipulating simply that there should be a pause of four-and-twenty hours for her to consider of it before she proceeded in the attempt to extricate herself. Of consolation there had not been a word. Said he, 'I am the last man to give advice in such a case'. Yet she had by no means astonished him when her confession came out. It came out, she knew not how. It was led up to by his declining the idea of marriage, and her congratulating him on his exemption from the prospect of the yoke, but memory was too dull to revive the one or two fiery minutes of broken language when she had been guilty of her dire misconduct.

This gentleman was no flatterer, scarcely a friend. He could look on her grief without soothing her. Supposing he had soothed her warmly? All her sentiments collected in her bosom to dash in reprobation of him at the thought. She nevertheless condemned him for his excessive coolness; his transparent anxiety not to be compromised by a syllable; his air of saying, 'I guessed as much, but why plead your case to me?' And his recommendation to her to be quite sure she did know what she meant, was a little insulting. She exonerated him from the intention; he treated her as a girl. By what he said of Miss Dale, he proposed that lady for imitation.

'I must be myself or I shall be playing hypocrite to dig my own pitfall,' she said to herself, while taking counsel with Laetitia as to the route for their walk, and admiring a becoming curve in her companion's hat.

Sir Willoughby, with many protestations of regret that letters of business debarred him from the pleasure of accompanying them, remarked upon the path proposed by Miss Dale, 'In that case you must have a footman.'

'Then we adopt the other,' said Clara, and they set forth.

'Sir Willoughby,' Miss Dale said to her, 'is always in alarm about our unprotectedness.'

Clara glanced up at the clouds and closed her parasol. She replied, 'It inspires timidity.'

There was that in the accent and character of the answer which warned Laetitia to expect the reverse of a quiet chatter with Miss Middleton.

'You are fond of walking?' She chose a peaceful topic.

'Walking or riding; yes, of walking,' said Clara. 'The difficulty is to find companions.'

'We shall lose Mr Whitford next week.'

'He goes?'

'He will be a great loss to me, for I do not ride,' Laetitia replied to the off-hand inquiry.

'Ah!'

Miss Middleton did not fan conversation when she simply breathed her voice.

Laetitia tried another neutral theme.

'The weather to-day suits our country,' she said.

'England, or Patterne Park? I am so devoted to mountains that I have no enthusiasm for flat land.'

'Do you call our country flat, Miss Middleton? We have undulations, hills, and we have sufficient diversity, meadows, rivers, copses, brooks, and good roads, and pretty by-paths.'

'The prettiness is overwhelming. It is very pretty to see; but to live with, I think I prefer ugliness. I can imagine learning to love ugliness. It's honest. However young you are, you cannot be deceived by it. These parks of rich people are a part of the prettiness. I would rather have fields, commons.'

'The parks give us delightful green walks, paths through beautiful woods.'

‘If there is a right-of-way for the public.’

‘There should be,’ said Miss Dale, wondering; and Clara cried: ‘I chafe at restraint: hedges and palings everywhere! I should have to travel ten years to sit down contented among these fortifications. Of course I can read of this rich kind of English country with pleasure in poetry. But it seems to me to require poetry. What would you say of human beings requiring it?’

‘That they are not so companionable but that the haze of distance improves the view.’

‘Then you do know that you are the wisest?’

Laetitia raised her dark eyelashes; she sought to understand. She could only fancy she did; and if she did, it meant that Miss Middleton thought her wise in remaining single.

Clara was full of a sombre preconception that her ‘jealousy’ had been hinted to Miss Dale.

‘You knew Miss Durham?’ she said.

‘Not intimately.’

‘As well as you know me?’

‘Not so well.’

‘But you saw more of her?’

‘She was more reserved with me.’

‘Oh! Miss Dale, I would not be reserved with you.’

The thrill of the voice caused Laetitia to steal a look. Clara’s eyes were bright, and she had the readiness to run to volubility of the fever-stricken; otherwise she did not betray excitement.

‘You will never allow any of these noble trees to be felled, Miss Middleton?’

‘The axe is better than decay, do you not think?’

‘I think your influence will be great and always used to good purpose.’

‘My influence, Miss Dale? I have begged a favour this morning and can not obtain the grant.’

It was lightly said, but Clara’s face was more significant, and ‘What?’ leaped from Laetitia’s lips.

Before she could excuse herself, Clara had answered: ‘My liberty.’

In another and higher tone Laetitia said, ‘What?’ and she looked round on her companion; she looked in the doubt that is open to conviction by a narrow aperture, and slowly and painfully yields access. Clara saw the vacancy of her expression gradually filling with woefulness.

‘I have begged him to release me from my engagement, Miss Dale.’

‘Sir Willoughby?’

‘It is incredible to you. He refuses. You see I have no influence.’

‘Miss Middleton, it is terrible!’

‘To be dragged to the marriage service against one’s will? Yes.’

‘Oh! Miss Middleton!’

‘Do you not think so?’

‘That cannot be your meaning.’

‘You do not suspect me of trifling? You know I would not. I am as much in earnest as a mouse in a trap.’

‘No, you will not misunderstand me! Miss Middleton, such a blow to Sir Willoughby would be shocking, most cruel! He is devoted to you.’

‘He was devoted to Miss Durham.’

‘Not so deeply; differently.’

‘Was he not very much courted at that time? He is now; not so much: he is not so young. But my reason for speaking of Miss Durham was to exclaim at the strangeness of a girl winning her freedom to plunge into wedlock. Is it comprehensible to you? She flies from one dungeon into another. These are the acts which astonish men at our conduct, and cause them to ridicule and, I dare say, despise us.’

‘But, Miss Middleton, for Sir Willoughby to grant such a request, if it was made…’

‘It was made, and by me, and will be made again. I throw it all on my unworthiness, Miss Dale. So the country will think of me, and quite justly. I would rather defend him than myself. He requires a different wife from anything I can be. That is my discovery; unhappily a late one. The blame is all mine. The world cannot be too hard on me. But I must be free if I am to be kind in my judgements even of the gentleman I have injured.’

‘So noble a gentleman!’ Laetitia sighed.

‘I will subscribe to any eulogy of him,’ said Clara, with a penetrating thought as to the possibility of a

lady experienced in him like Laetitia taking him for noble. ‘He has a noble air. I say it sincerely, that your appreciation of him proves his nobility.’ Her feeling of opposition to Sir Willoughby pushed her to this extravagance, gravely perplexing Laetitia. ‘And it is,’ added Clara, as if to support what she had said, ‘a withering rebuke to me; I know him less, at least have not had so long an experience of him.’

Laetitia pondered on an obscurity in these words which would have accused her thick intelligence but for a glimmer it threw on another most obscure communication. She feared it might be, strange though it seemed, jealousy, a shade of jealousy affecting Miss Middleton, as had been vaguely intimated by Sir Willoughby when they were waiting in the hall. ‘A little feminine ailment, a want of comprehension of a perfect friendship’; those were his words to her: and he suggested vaguely that care must be taken in the eulogy of her friend.

She resolved to be explicit.

‘I have not said that I think him beyond criticism, Miss Middleton.’

‘Noble?’

‘He has faults. When we have known a person for years the faults come out, but custom makes light of them; and I suppose we feel flattered by seeing what it would be difficult to be blind to! A very little flatters us! Now, do you not admire that view? It is my favourite.’

Clara gazed over rolling richness of foliage, wood and water, and a church-spire, a town and horizon hills. There sung a sky-lark.

‘Not even the bird that does not fly away!’ she said; meaning, she had no heart for the bird satisfied to rise and descend in this place.

Laetitia travelled to some notion, dim and immense, of Miss Middleton’s fever of distaste. She shrunk from it in a kind of dread lest it might be contagious and rob her of her one ever-fresh possession of the homely picturesque; but Clara melted her by saying, ‘For your sake I could love it… in time; or some dear old English scene. Since… since this… this change in me, I find I cannot separate landscape from associations. Now I learn how youth goes. I have grown years older in a week. – Miss Dale, if he were to give me my freedom? if he were to cast me off? if he stood alone?’

‘I should pity him.’

‘Him – not me! Oh! right! I hoped you would; I knew you would.’

Laetitia’s attempt to shift with Miss Middleton’s shiftiness was vain; for now she seemed really listening to the language of jealousy;–jealous of the ancient Letty Dale – and immediately before the tone was quite void of it.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but you make me feel myself in the dark, and when I do I have the habit of throwing myself for guidance upon such light as I have within. You shall know me, if you will, as well as I know myself. And do not think me far from the point when I say I have a feeble health. I am what the doctors call anaemic; a rather bloodless creature. The blood is life, so I have not much life. Ten years back – eleven, if I must be precise, I thought of conquering the world with a pen! The result is that I am glad of a fireside, and not sure of always having one: and that is my achievement. My days are monotonous, but if I have a dread, it is that there will be an alteration in them. My father has very little money. We subsist on what private income he has, and his pension: he was an army doctor. I may by-and-by have to live in a town for pupils. I could be grateful to any one who would save me from that. I should be astonished at his choosing to have me burden his household as well. – Have I now explained the nature of my pity? It would be the pity of common sympathy, pure lymph of pity, as nearly disembodied as can be. Last year’s sheddings from the tree do not form an attractive garland. Their merit is, that they have not the ambition. I am like them. Now, Miss Middleton, I cannot make myself more bare to you. I hope you see my sincerity.’

‘I do see it,’ Clara said.

With the second heaving of her heart, she cried: ‘See it, and envy you that humility! proud if I could ape it! Oh, how proud if I could speak so truthfully true! – You would not have spoken so to me without some good feeling out of which friends are made. That I am sure of. To be very truthful to a person, one must have a liking. So I judge by myself. Do I presume too much?’

Kindness was on Laetitia’s face.

‘But now,’ said Clara, swimming on the wave in her bosom, ‘I tax you with the silliest suspicion ever entertained by one of your rank. Lady, you have deemed me capable of the meanest of our vices! – Hold this hand, Laetitia; my friend, will you? Something is going on in me.’

Laetitia took her hand, and saw and felt that something was going on.

Clara said, ‘You are a woman.’

It was her effort to account for the something.

She swam for a brilliant instant on tears, and yielded to the overflow.

When they had fallen, she remarked upon her first long breath quite coolly: ‘An encouraging picture of a rebel, is it not?’

Her companion murmured to soothe her.

‘It’s little, it’s nothing,’ said Clara, pained to keep her lips in line.

They walked forward, holding hands, deep-hearted to one another.

‘I like this country better now,’ the shaken girl resumed. ‘I could lie down in it and ask only for sleep. I should like to think of you here. How nobly self-respecting you must be, to speak as you did! Our dreams of heroes and heroines are cold glitter beside the reality. I have been lately thinking of myself as an outcast of my sex, and to have a good woman liking me a little… loving? Oh, Laetitia, my friend, I should have kissed you, and not made this exhibition of myself – and if you call it hysterics, woe to you! for I bit my tongue to keep it off when I had hardly strength to bring my teeth together – if that idea of jealousy had not been in your head. You had it from him.’

‘I have not alluded to it in any word that I can recollect.’

‘He can imagine no other cause for my wish to be released. I have noticed, it is his instinct to reckon on women as constant by their nature. They are the needles, and he the magnet. Jealousy of you, Miss Dale! Laetitia, may I speak?’

‘Say everything you please.’

‘I could wish: – Do you know my baptismal name?’

‘Clara.’

‘At last! I could wish… that is, if it were your wish. Yes, I could wish that. Next to independence, my wish would be that. I risk offending you. Do not let your delicacy take arms against me. I wish him happy in the only way that he can be made happy. There is my jealousy.’

‘Was it what you were going to say just now?’

‘No.’

‘I thought not.’

‘I was going to say – and I believe the rack would not make me truthful like you, Laetitia – well, has it ever struck you: remember, I do see his merits; I speak to his faithfullest friend, and I acknowledge he is attractive, he has manly tastes and habits; but has it never struck you… I have no right to ask; I know that men must have faults, I do not expect them to be saints; I am not one; I wish I were.’

‘Has it never struck me…?’ Laetitia prompted her.

‘That very few women are able to be straightforwardly sincere in their speech, however much they may desire to be?’

‘They are differently educated. Great misfortune brings it to them.’

‘I am sure your answer is correct. Have you ever known a woman who was entirely an Egoist?’

‘Personally known one? We are not better than men.’

‘I do not pretend that we are. I have latterly become an Egoist, thinking of no one but myself, scheming to make use of every soul I meet. But then, women are in the position of inferiors. They are hardly out of the nursery when a lasso is round their necks; and if they have beauty, no wonder they turn it to a weapon and make as many captives as they can. I do not wonder! My sense of shame at my natural weakness and the arrogance of men would urge me to make hundreds captive, if that is being a coquette. I should not have compassion for those lofty birds, the hawks. To see them with their wings clipped would amuse me. Is there any other way of punishing them?’

‘Consider what you lose in punishing them.’

‘I consider what they gain if we do not.’

Laetitia supposed she was listening to discursive observations upon the inequality in the relations of the sexes. A suspicion of a drift to a closer meaning had been lulled, and the colour flooded her swiftly when Clara said: ‘Here is the difference I see; I see it; I am certain of it: women who are called coquettes make their conquests not of the best of men; but men who are Egoists have *good* women for their victims; women on whose devoted constancy they feed; they drink it like blood. I am sure I am not taking the merely feminine view. They punish themselves too by passing over the one suitable to them, who could really give them what they crave to have, and they go where they…’ Clara stopped. ‘I have not your power to express ideas,’ she said.

‘Miss Middleton, you have a dreadful power,’ said Laetitia.

Clara smiled affectionately. ‘I am not aware of any. Whose cottage is this?’

‘My father’s. Will you not come in? into the garden?’

Clara took note of ivied windows and roses in the porch. She thanked Laetitia and said: ‘I will call for you in an hour.’

‘Are you walking on the road alone?’ said Laetitia, incredulously, with an eye to Sir Willoughby’s dismay.

‘I put my trust in the high-road,’ Clara replied, and turned away, but turned back to Laetitia and offered her face to be kissed.

The ‘dreadful power’ of this young lady had fervently impressed Laetitia, and in kissing her she marvelled at her gentleness and girlishness.

Clara walked on, unconscious of her possession of power of any kind.

CHAPTER 17

The Porcelain Vase

DURING the term of Clara’s walk with Laetitia, Sir Willoughby’s shrunken self-esteem, like a garment hung to the fire after exposure to tempestuous weather, recovered some of the sleekness of its velvet pile in the society of Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, who represented to him the world he feared and tried to keep sunny for himself by all the arts he could exercise. She expected him to be the gay Sir Willoughby, and her look being as good as an incantation summons, he produced the accustomed sprite, giving her sally for sally. Queens govern the polite. Popularity with men, serviceable as it is for winning favouritism with women, is of poor value to a sensitive gentleman, anxious even to prognostic apprehension on behalf of his pride, his comfort and his prevalence. And men are grossly purchasable; good wines have them, good cigars, a goodfellow air: they are never quite worth their salt even then; you can make head against their ill looks. But the looks of women will at one blow work on you the downright difference which is between the cock of lordly plume and the moulting. Happily they may be gained: a clever tongue will gain them, a leg. They are with you to a certainty if Nature iswith you; if you are elegant and discreet: if the sun is on you, and they see you shining in it; or if they have seen you well-stationed and handsome in the sun. And once gained they are your mirrors for life, and far more constant than the glass. That tale of their caprice is absurd. Hit their imaginations once, they are your slaves, only demanding common courtier service of you. They will deny that you are ageing, they will cover you from scandal, they will refuse to see you ridiculous. Sir Willoughby’s instinct, or skin, or outfloating feelers, told him of these mysteries of the influence of the sex; he had as little need to study them as a lady breathed on.

He had some need to know them in fact; and with him the need of a protection for himself called it forth; he was intuitively a conjurer in self-defence, long-sighted, wanting no directions to the herb he was to suck at when fighting a serpent. His dulness of vision into the heart of his enemy was compensated by the agile sensitiveness obscuring but rendering him miraculously active, and, without supposing his need immediate, he deemed it politic to fascinate Mrs Mountstuart and anticipate ghastly possibilities in the future by dropping a hint; not of Clara’s fickleness, you may be sure; of his own, rather; or, more justly, of an altered view of Clara’s character. He touched on the *rogue in porcelain*.

Set gently laughing by his relishing humour, ‘I get nearer to it,’ he said.

‘Remember I’m in love with her,’ said Mrs Mountstuart.

‘That is our penalty.’

‘A pleasant one for you.’

He assented. ‘Is the “rogue” to be eliminated?’

‘Ask when she’s a mother, my dear Sir Willoughby.’

‘This is how I read you: –’

‘I shall accept any interpretation that is complimentary.’

‘Not one will satisfy me of being sufficiently so, and so I leave it to the character to fill out the epigram.’

‘Do. What hurry is there? And don’t be misled by your objection to rogue; which would be reasonable if

you had not secured her.'

The door of a hollow chamber of horrible reverberation was opened within him by this remark.

He tried to say in jest, that it was not always a passionate admiration that held the rogue fast; but he muddled it in the thick of his conscious thunder, and Mrs Mountstuart smiled to see him shot from the smooth-flowing dialogue into the cataracts by one simple reminder to the lover of his luck. Necessarily, after a fall, the pitch of their conversation relaxed.

'Miss Dale is looking well,' he said.

'Fairly: she ought to marry,' said Mrs Mountstuart.

He shook his head. 'Persuade her.'

She nodded. 'Example may have some effect.'

He looked extremely abstracted. 'Yes, it is time. Where is the man you could recommend for her complement? She has now what was missing before, a ripe intelligence in addition to her happy disposition – romantic, you would say. I can't think women the worse for that.'

'A dash of it.'

'She calls it "leafage".'

'Very pretty. And have you relented about your horse Achmet?'

'I don't sell him under four hundred.'

'Poor Johnny Busshe! You forget that his wife doles him out his money. You're a hard bargainer, Sir Willoughby.'

'I mean the price to be prohibitive.'

'Very well; and "leafage" is good for hide-and-seek; especially when there is no rogue in ambush. And that's the worst I can say of Laetitia Dale. An exaggerated devotion is the scandal of our sex. They say you're the hardest man of business in the county too, and I can believe it; for at home and abroad your aim is to get the best of everybody. You see I've no leafage, I am perfectly matter-of-fact, bald.'

'Nevertheless, my dear Mrs Mountstuart, I can assure you that conversing with you has much the same exhilarating effect on me as conversing with Miss Dale.'

'But, leafage! leafage! You hard bargainers have no compassion for devoted spinsters.'

'I tell you my sentiments absolutely.'

'And you have mine moderately expressed.'

She recollected the purpose of her morning's visit, which was to engage Dr Middleton to dine with her, and Sir Willoughby conducted her to the library-door. 'Insist,' he said.

Awaiting her reappearance, the refreshment of the talk he had sustained, not without point, assisted him to distinguish in its complete abhorrent orb the offence committed against him by his bride. And this he did through projecting it more and more away from him, so that in the outer distance it involved his personal emotions less, while observation was enabled to compass its vastness, and, as it were, perceive the whole spherical mass of the wretched girl's guilt impudently turning on its axis.

Thus to detach an injury done to us, and plant it in space, for mathematical measurement of its weight and bulk, is an art; it may also be an instinct of self-preservation; otherwise, as when mountains crumble adjacent villages are crushed, men of feeling may at any moment be killed outright by the iniquitous and the callous. But, as an art, it should be known to those who are for practising an art so beneficent, that circumstances must lend their aid. Sir Willoughby's instinct even had sat dull and crushed before his conversation with Mrs Mountstuart. She lifted him to one of his ideals of himself. Among gentlemen he was the English gentleman; with ladies his aim was the Gallican courtier of any period from Louis Treize to Louis Quinze. He could doat on those who led him to talk in that character – backed by English solidity, you understand. Roast beef stood eminent behind the soufflé and champagne. An English squire excelling his fellows at hazardous leaps in public, he was additionally a polished whisperer, a lively dialoguer,

one for witty bouts, with something in him – capacity for a drive and dig or two – beyond mere wit, as they soon learned who called up his reserves, and had a bosom for pinking. So much for his ideal of himself. Now, Clara not only never evoked, never responded to it, she repelled it; there was no flourishing of it near her. He considerately overlooked these facts in his ordinary calculations; he was a man of honour and she was a girl of beauty; but the accidental blooming of his ideal, with Mrs Mountstuart, on the very heels of Clara's offence, restored him to full command of his art of detachment, and he thrust her out, quite apart from himself, to contemplate her disgraceful revolutions.

Deeply read in the Book of Egoism that he was, he knew the wisdom of the sentence: *An injured pride that strikes not out will strike home*. What was he to strike with? Ten years younger, Laetitia might have been the

instrument. To think of her now was preposterous. Beside Clara she had the hue of Winter under the springing bough. He tossed her away, vexed to the very soul by an ostentatious decay that shrank from comparison with the blooming creature he had to scourge in self-defence, by some agency or other.

Mrs Mountstuart was on the step of her carriage when the silken parasols of the young ladies were descried on a slope of the park, where the yellow green of May-clothed beeches flowed over the brown ground of last year's leaves.

'Who's the cavalier?' she inquired.

A gentleman escorted them.

'Vernon? No! he's pegging at Crossjay,' quoth Willoughby.

Vernon and Crossjay came out for the boy's half-hour's run before his dinner. Crossjay spied Miss Middleton and was off to meet her at a bound. Vernon followed him leisurely.

'The rogue has no cousin, has she?' said Mrs Mountstuart.

'It's a family of one son or one daughter for generations,' replied Willoughby.

'And Letty Dale?'

'Cousin!' he exclaimed, as if wealth had been imputed to Miss Dale; adding: 'No male cousin.'

A railway station fly drove out of the avenue on the circle to the hall-entrance. Flitch was driver. He had no right to be there, he was doing wrong, but he was doing it under cover of an office, to support his wife and young ones, and his deprecating touches of the hat spoke of these apologies to his former master with dog-like pathos.

Sir Willoughby beckoned to him to approach.

'So you are here,' he said. 'You have luggage.'

Flitch jumped from the box and read one of the labels aloud: 'Lieutenant-Colonel H. De Craye.'

'And the colonel met the ladies? Overtook them?'

Here seemed to come dismal matter for Flitch to relate.

He began upon the abstract origin of it: he had lost his place in Sir Willoughby's establishment, and was obliged to look about for work where it was to be got, and though he knew he had no right to be where he was, he hoped to be forgiven because of the mouths he had to feed as a flyman attached to the railway station, where this gentleman, the colonel, hired him, and he believed Sir Willoughby would excuse him for driving a friend, which the colonel was, he recollected well, and the colonel recollected him, and he said, not noticing how he was rigged: 'What! Flitch! back in your old place? Am I expected?' and he told the colonel his unfortunate situation. 'Not back, colonel; no such luck for me' and Colonel De Craye was a very kind-hearted gentleman, as he always had been, and asked kindly after his family. And it might be that such poor work as he was doing now he might be deprived of, such is misfortune when it once harpoons a man; you may dive, and you may fly, but it sticks in you, once do a foolish thing. 'May I humbly beg of you, if you'll be so good, Sir Willoughby,' said Flitch, passing to evidence of the sad mishap. He opened the door of the fly, displaying fragments of broken porcelain.

'But, what, what! what's the story of this?' cried Sir Willoughby.

'What is it?' said Mrs Mountstuart, pricking up her ears.

'It was a vaws,' Flitch replied in elegy.

'A porcelain vase!' interpreted Sir Willoughby.

'China!' Mrs Mountstuart faintly shrieked.

One of the pieces was handed to her inspection.

She held it close, she held it distant. She sighed horribly.

'The man had better have hanged himself,' said she.

Flitch bestirred his misfortune-sodden features and members for a continuation of the doleful narrative.

'How did this occur?' Sir Willoughby peremptorily asked him.

Flitch appealed to his former master for testimony that he was a good and a careful driver.

Sir Willoughby thundered: 'I tell you to tell me how this occurred.'

'Not a drop, my lady! not since my supper last night, if there's any truth in me!' Flitch implored succour of Mrs Mountstuart.

'Drive straight,' she said, and braced him.

His narrative was then direct.

Near Piper's mill, where the Wicker brook crossed the Rebdon road, one of Hoppner's wagons,

overloaded as usual, was forcing the horses uphill, when Flitch drove down at an easy pace, and saw himself between Hoppner's cart come to a stand and a young lady advancing: and just then the carter smacks his whip, the horses pull half mad. The young lady starts behind the cart, and up jumps the colonel, and, to save the young lady, Flitch dashed ahead and did save her, he thanked Heaven for it, and more when he came to see who the young lady was.

'She was alone?' said Sir Willoughby in tragic amazement, staring at Flitch.

'Very well, you saved her, and you upset the fly,' Mrs Mountstuart jogged him on.

'Bartlett, our old head-keeper, was a witness, my lady; I had to drive half up the bank, and it's true – over the fly did go; and the vaws it shoots out against the twelfth mile-stone, just as though *there* was the chance for it! for nobody else was injured, and knocked against anything else, it never would have flown all to pieces, so that it took Bartlett and me ten minutes to collect every one, down to the smallest piece there was; and he said, and I can't help thinking myself, there was a Providence in it, for we all come together so as you might say we was made to do as we did.'

'So then Horace adopted the prudent course of walking on with the ladies instead of trusting his limbs again to this capsizing fly,' Sir Willoughby said to Mrs Mountstuart; and she rejoined: 'Lucky that no one was hurt.'

Both of them eyed the nose of poor Flitch, and simultaneously they delivered a verdict in 'Humph!'

Mrs Mountstuart handed the wretch a half-crown from her purse. Sir Willoughby directed the footman in attendance to unload the fly and gather up the fragments of porcelain carefully, bidding Flitch be quick in his departing.

'The colonel's wedding-present! I shall call to-morrow.' Mrs Mountstuart waved her adieu.

'Come every day! – Yes, I suppose we may guess the destination of the vase.' He bowed her off, and she cried:

'Well, now, the gift can be shared, if you're either of you for a division.' In the crash of the carriage-wheels he heard, 'At any rate there was a rogue in *that* porcelain.'

These are the slaps we get from a heedless world.

As for the vase, it was Horace De Craye's loss. Wedding-present he would have to produce, and decidedly not in chips. It had the look of a costly vase, but that was no question for the moment: – What was meant by Clara being seen walking on the high-road alone? – What snare, traceable ad inferas, had ever induced Willoughby Patterne to make her the repository and fortress of his honour?

CHAPTER 18

Colonel De Craye

CLARA came along chatting and laughing with Colonel De Craye, young Crossjay's hand under one of her arms, and her parasol flashing; a dazzling offender; as if she wished to compel the spectator to recognize the dainty rogue in porcelain; really insufferably fair: perfect in height and grace of movement; exquisitely tressed; red-lipped, the colour striking out to a distance from her ivory skin; a sight to set the woodland dancing, and turn the heads of the town; though beautiful, a jury of art critics might pronounce her not to be. Irregular features are condemned in beauty. Beautiful figure, they could say. A description of her figure and her walking would have won her any praises: and she wore a dress cunning to embrace the shape and flutter loose about it, in the spirit of a Summer's day. Calypso-clad, Dr Middleton would have called her. See

the silver birch in a breeze: here it swells, there it scatters, and it is puffed to a round and it streams like a pennon, and now gives the glimpse and shine of the white stem's line within, now hurries over it, denying that it was visible, with a chatter along the sweeping folds, while still the white peeps through. She had the wonderful art of dressing to suit the season and the sky. To-day the art was ravishingly companionable with her sweet-lighted face: too sweet, too vividly meaningful for pretty, if not of the strict severity for beautiful. Millinery would tell us that she wore a fichu of thin white muslin crossed in front on a dress of the same light stuff, trimmed with deep rose. She carried a grey-silk parasol, traced at the borders with green creepers, and across the arm devoted to Crossjay a length of trailing ivy, and in that hand a bunch of the

first long grasses. These hues of red rose and pale green ruffled andpouted in the billowy white of the dress ballooning and valleying softly, like a yacht before the sail bends low; but she walked not like one blown against; resembling rather the day of the South-west driving the clouds, gallantly firm in commotion; interfusing colour and varying in her features from laugh to smile and look of settled pleasure, like the heavens above the breeze.

Sir Willoughby, as he frequently had occasion to protest to Clara, was no poet: he was a more than commonly candid English gentleman in his avowed dislike of the poet's nonsense, verbiage, verse; not one of those latterly terrorized by the noise made about the fellow into silent contempt; a sentiment that may sleep, and has not to be defended. He loathed the fellow, fought the fellow. But he was one with the poet upon that prevailing theme of verse, the charms of women. He was, to his ill-luck, intensely susceptible, and where he led men after him to admire, his admiration became a fury. He could see at a glance that Horace De Craye admired Miss Middleton. Horace was a man of taste, could hardly, could not, do other than admire; but how curious that in the setting forth of Clara and Miss Dale, to his own contemplation and comparison of them, Sir Willoughby had given but a nodding approbation of his bride's appearance! He had not attached weight to it recently.

Her conduct, and foremost, if not chiefly, her having been discovered, positively met by his friend Horace, walking on the high-road without companion or attendant, increased a sense of pain so very unusual with him that he had cause to be indignant. Coming on this condition, his admiration of the girl who wounded him was as bitter a thing as a man could feel. Resentment, fed from the main springs of his nature, turned it to wormwood, and not a whit the less was it admiration when he resolved to chastise her with a formal indication of his disdain. Her present gaiety sounded to him like laughter heard in the shadow of the pulpit.

'You have escaped!' he said to her, while shaking the hand of his friend Horace and cordially welcoming him. 'My dear fellow! and, by the way, you had a squeak for it, I hear from Flitch.'

'I, Willoughby? not a bit,' said the colonel; 'we get into a fly to get out of it; and Flitch helped me out as well as in, good fellow; just dusting my coat as he did it. The only bit of bad management was that Miss Middleton had to step aside a trifle hurriedly.'

'You knew Miss Middleton at once?'

'Flitch did me the favour to introduce me. He first precipitated me at Miss Middleton's feet, and then he introduced me, in old oriental fashion, to my sovereign.'

Sir Willoughby's countenance was enough for his friend Horace. Quarter-wheeling to Clara, he said: '"Tis the place I'm to occupy for life, Miss Middleton, though one is not always fortunate to have a bright excuse for taking it at the commencement.'

Clara said: 'Happily you were not hurt, Colonel De Craye.'

'I was in the hands of the Loves. Not the Graces, I'm afraid; I've an image of myself. Dear no! My dear Willoughby, you never made such a headlong declaration as that. It would have looked like a magnificent impulse, if the posture had only been choicer. And Miss Middleton didn't laugh. At least I saw nothing but pity.'

'You did not write,' said Willoughby.

'Because it was a toss-up of a run to Ireland or here, and I came here not to go there; and, by the way, fetched a jug with me to offer up to the gods of ill-luck; and they accepted the propitiation.'

'Wasn't it packed in a box?'

'No, it was wrapped in paper, to show its elegant form. I caught sight of it in the shop yesterday and carried it off this morning, and presented it to Miss Middleton at noon, without any form at all.'

Willoughby knew his friend Horace's mood when the Irish tongue in him threatened to wag.

'You see what may happen,' he said to Clara.

'As far as I am in fault I regret it,' she answered.

'Flitch says the accident occurred through his driving up the bank to save you from the wheels.'

'Flitch may go and whisper that down the neck of his empty whisky-flask,' said Horace De Craye. 'And then let him cork it.'

'The consequence is that we have a porcelain vase broken. You should not walk on the road alone, Clara. You ought to have a companion, always. It is the rule here.'

'I had left Miss Dale at the cottage.'

'You ought to have had the dogs.'

'Would they have been any protection to the vase?'

Horace De Craye crowed cordially.

‘I’m afraid not, Miss Middleton. One must go to the witches for protection to vases; and they’re all in the air now, having their own way with us, which accounts for the confusion in politics and society, and the rise in the price of broomsticks, to prove it true, as they tell us, that every nook and corner wants a mighty sweeping. Miss Dale looks beaming,’ said De Craye, wishing to divert Willoughby from his anger with sense as well as nonsense.

‘You have not been visiting Ireland recently?’ said Sir Willoughby.

‘No, nor making acquaintance with an actor in an Irish part in a drama cast in the Green Island. ’Tis Flitch, my dear Willoughby, has been and stirred the native in me, and we’ll present him to you for the like good office when we hear after a number of years that you’ve not wrinkled your forehead once at your liege lady. Take the poor old dog back home, will you? He’s crazed to be at the Hall. I say, Willoughby, it would be a good bit of work to take him back. Think of it; you’ll do the popular thing, I’m sure. I’ve a superstition that Flitch ought to drive you from the church-door. If I were in luck, I’d have him drive me.’

‘The man’s a drunkard, Horace.’

‘He fuddles his poor nose. ’Tis merely unction to the exile. Sober struggles below. He drinks to rock his heart, because he has one. Now let me intercede for poor Flitch.’

‘Not a word of him. He threw up his place.’

‘To try his fortune in the world, as the best of us do, though livery runs after us to tell us there’s no being an independent gentleman, and comes a cold day we haul on the metal-button coat again, with a good ha! of satisfaction. You’ll do the popular thing. Miss Middleton joins in the pleading.’

‘No pleading!’

‘When I’ve vowed upon my eloquence. Willoughby, I’d bring you to pardon the poor dog?’

‘Not a word of him!’

‘Just one!’

Sir Willoughby battled with himself to repress a state of temper that put him to marked disadvantage beside his friend Horace in high spirits. Ordinarily he enjoyed these fits of Irish of him, which were Horace’s fun and play, at times involuntary, and then they indicated a recklessness that might embrace mischief. De Craye, as Willoughby had often reminded him, was properly Norman. The blood of two or three Irish mothers in his line, however, was enough to dance him, and if his fine profile spoke of the stiffer race, his eyes and the quick run of the lip in the cheek, and a number of his qualities, were evidence of the maternal legacy.

‘My word has been said about the man,’ Willoughby replied.

‘But I’ve wagered on your heart against your word, and can’t afford to lose; and there’s a double reason for revoking for you!’

‘I don’t see either of them. Here are the ladies.’

‘You’ll think of the poor beast, Willoughby.’

‘I hope for better occupation.’

‘If he drives a wheelbarrow at the Hall he’ll be happier than on board a chariot at large. He’s broken-hearted.’

‘He’s too much in the way of breakages, my dear Horace.’

‘Oh, the vase! the bit of porcelain!’ sung De Craye. ‘Well, we’ll talk him over by and by.’

‘If it pleases you; but my rules are never amended.’

‘Inalterable, are they? – like those of an ancient people, who might as well have worn a jacket of lead for the comfort they had of their boast. The beauty of laws for human creatures is their adaptability to new stitchings.’

Colonel De Craye walked at the heels of his leader to make his bow to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel.

Sir Willoughby had guessed the person who inspired his friend Horace to plead so pertinaciously and inopportunely for the man Flitch: and it had not improved his temper or the pose of his rejoinders; he had winced under the contrast of his friend Horace’s easy, laughing, sparkling, musical air and manner with his own stiffness; and he had seen Clara’s face, too, scanning the contrast – he was fatally driven to exaggerate his discontentment, which did not restore him to serenity. He would have learned more from what his abrupt swing round of the shoulder precluded his beholding. There was an interchange between Colonel De Craye and Miss Middleton; spontaneous on both sides. His was a look that said: ‘You were right’; hers: ‘I knew it’. Her look was calmer, and after the first instant clouded as by wearifulness of sameness; his was brilliant, astonished, speculative, and admiring, pitiful: a look that poised over a revelation, called up the

hosts of wonder to question strange fact.

It had passed unseen by Sir Willoughby. The observer was the one who could also supply the key of the secret. Miss Dale had found Colonel De Craye in company with Miss Middleton at her gateway. They were laughing and talking together like friends of old standing, De Craye as Irish as he could be: and the Irish tongue and gentlemanly manner are an irresistible challenge to the opening steps of familiarity when accident has broken the ice. Flitch was their theme; and: 'Oh, but if we go up to Willoughby hand in hand; and bob a courtesy to 'm and beg his pardon for Mister Flitch, won't he melt to such a pair

of suppliants? of course he will!' Miss Middleton said he would not. Colonel De Craye wagered he would; he knew Willoughby best. Miss Middleton looked simply grave; a way of asserting the contrary opinion that tells of rueful experience. 'We'll see,' said the colonel. They chatted like a couple unexpectedly discovering in one another a common dialect among strangers. Can there be an end to it when those two meet? They prattle, they fill the minutes, as though they were violently to be torn asunder at a coming signal, and must have it out while they can; it is a meeting of mountain brooks; not a colloquy, but a chasing, impossible to say which flies, which follows, or what the topic, so interlinguistic are they and rapidly counterchanging. After their conversation of an hour before, Laetitia watched Miss Middleton in surprise at her lightness of mind. Clara bathed in mirth. A boy in a summer stream shows not heartier refreshment of his whole being. Laetitia could now understand Vernon's idea of her wit. And it seemed that she also had Irish blood. Speaking of Ireland, Miss Middleton said she had cousins there, her only relatives.

'The laugh told me that,' said Colonel De Craye.

Laetitia and Vernon paced up and down the lawn. Colonel De Craye was talking with English sedateness to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. Clara and young Crossjay strayed.

'If I might advise, I would say, do not leave the Hall immediately, not yet,' Laetitia said to Vernon.

'You know, then?'

'I cannot understand why it was that I was taken into her confidence.'

'I counselled it.'

'But it was done without an object that I can see.'

'The speaking did her good.'

'But how capricious! how changeful!'

'Better now than later.'

'Surely she has only to ask to be released? – to ask earnestly: if it is her wish.'

'You are mistaken.'

'Why does she not make a confidant of her father?'

'That she will have to do. She wished to spare him.'

'He cannot be spared if she is to break the engagement.'

'She thought of sparing him the annoyance. Now there's to be a tussle, he must share in it.'

'Or she thought he might not side with her?'

'She has not a single instinct of cunning. You judge her harshly.'

'She moved me on the walk out. Coming home I felt differently.'

Vernon glanced at Colonel De Craye.

'She wants *good* guidance,' continued Laetitia.

'She has not an idea of treachery.'

'You think so? It may be true. But she seems one born devoid of patience, easily made reckless. There is a wildness… I judge by her way of speaking; that at least appeared sincere. She does not practise concealment. He will naturally find it almost incredible. The change in her, so sudden, so wayward, is unintelligible to me. To me it is the conduct of a creature untamed. He may hold her to her word and be justified.'

'Let him look out if he does!'

'Is not that harsher than anything I have said of her?'

'I'm not appointed to praise her. I fancy I read the case; and it's a case of opposition of temperaments. We never can tell the person quite suited to us; it strikes us in a flash.'

'That they are *not* suited to us? Oh, no; that comes by degrees.'

'Yes, but the accumulation of evidence, or sentience, if you like, is combustible; we don't command the spark; it may be late in falling. And you argue in her favour. Consider her as a generous and impulsive girl, outwearied at last.'

‘By what?’

‘By anything; by his loftiness, if you like. He flies too high for her, we will say.’

‘Sir Willoughby an eagle?’

‘She may be tired of his eyrie.’

The sound of the word in Vernon’s mouth smote on a consciousness she had of his full grasp of Sir Willoughby and her own timid knowledge, though he was not a man who played on words.

If he had eased his heart in stressing the first syllable, it was only temporary relief. He was heavy-browed enough.

‘But I cannot conceive what she expects me to do by confiding her sense of her position to me,’ said Laetitia.

‘We none of us know what will be done. We hang on Willoughby, who hangs on whatever it is that supports him: and there we are in a swarm.’

‘You see the wisdom of staying, Mr Whitford.’

‘It must be over in a day or two. Yes, I stay.’

‘She inclines to obey you.’

‘I should be sorry to stake my authority on her obedience. We must decide something about Crossjay, and get the money for his crammer, if it is to be got. If not, I may get a man to trust me. I mean to drag the boy away. Willoughby has been at him with the tune of gentleman, and has laid hold of him by one ear. When I say “her obedience”, she is not in a situation, nor in a condition to be led blindly by anybody. She must rely on herself, do everything herself. It’s a knot that won’t bear touching by any hand save hers.’

‘I fear –’ said Laetitia.

‘Have no such fear.’

‘If it should come to his positively refusing.’

‘He faces the consequences.’

‘You do not think of her.’

Vernon looked at his companion.

CHAPTER 19

Colonel De Craye and Clara Middleton

MISS MIDDLETON finished her stroll with Crossjay by winding her trailer of ivy in a wreath round his hat and sticking her bunch of grasses in the wreath. She then commanded him to sit on the ground beside a big rhododendron, there to await her return. Crossjay had informed her of a design he entertained to be off with a horde of boys nesting in high trees, and marking spots where wasps and hornets were to be attacked in Autumn: she thought it a dangerous business, and as the boy’s dinnerbell had very little restraint over him when he was in the flush of a scheme of this description, she wished to make tolerably sure of him through the charm she not unreadily believed she could fling on lads of his age. ‘Promise me you will not move from here until I come back, and when I come I will give you a kiss.’ Crossjay promised. She left him and forgot him.

Seeing by her watch fifteen minutes to the ringing of the bell, a sudden resolve that she would speak to her father without another minute’s delay had prompted her like a superstitious impulse to abandon her aimless course and be direct. She knew what was good for her; she knew it now more clearly than in the morning. To be taken away instantly! was her cry. There could be no further doubt. Had there been any before? But she would not in the morning have suspected herself of a capacity for evil, and of a pressing need to be saved from herself. She was not pure of nature: it may be that we breed saintly souls which are: she was pure of will: fire rather than ice. And in beginning to see the elements she was made of she did not shuffle them to a heap with her sweet looks to front her. She put to her account some strength, much weakness; she almost dared to gaze unblinking at a perilous evil tendency. The glimpse of it drove her to her father.

‘He must take me away at once; to-morrow!’

She wished to spare her father. So unsparing of herself was she, that, in her hesitation to speak to him of her change of feeling for Sir Willoughby, she would not suffer it to be attributed in her own mind to a daughter's anxious consideration about her father's loneliness; an idea she had indulged formerly. Acknowledging that it was imperative she should speak, she understood that she had refrained, even to the inflicting upon herself of such humiliation as to run dilating on her woes to others, because of the silliest of human desires to preserve her reputation for consistency. She had heard women abused for shallowness and flightiness: she had heard her father denounce them as veering weather-vanes, and his oft-repeated quid femina possit:[14] for her sex's sake, and also to appear an exception to her sex, this reasoning creature desired to be thought consistent.

Just on the instant of her addressing him, saying: 'Father,' a note of seriousness in his ear, it struck her that the occasion for saying all had not yet arrived, and she quickly interposed: 'Papa'; and helped him to look lighter. The petition to be taken away was uttered.

'To London?' said Dr Middleton. 'I don't know who'll take us in.'

'To France, papa?'

'That means hotel life.'

'Only for two or three weeks.'

'Weeks! I am under an engagement to dine with Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson five days hence – that is, on Thursday.'

'Could we not find an excuse?'

'Break an engagement? No, my dear, not even to escape drinking a widow's wine.'

'Does a word bind us?'

'Why, what else should?'

'I think I am not very well.'

'We'll call in that man we met at dinner here: Corney: a capital doctor; an old-fashioned anecdotal doctor. How is it you are not well, my love? You look well. I cannot conceive your not being well.'

'It is only that I want change of air, papa.'

'There we are – a change! semper eadem! Women will be wanting a change of air in Paradise; a change of angels too I might surmise. A change from quarters like these to a French hotel would be a descent! – "this the seat, this mournful gloom for that celestial light?"[15] I am perfectly at home in the library here. That excellent fellow Whitford and I have real days; and I like him for showing fight to his elder and better.'

'He is going to leave.'

'I know nothing of it, and I shall append no credit to the tale until I do know. He is headstrong, but he answers to a rap.'

Clara's bosom heaved. The speechless insurrection threatened her eyes.

A South-west shower lashed the window-panes and suggested to Dr Middleton shuddering visions of the Channel passage on board a steamer.

'Corney shall see you: he is a sparkling draught in person; probably illiterate, if I may judge from one interruption of my discourse when he sat opposite me, but lettered enough to respect Learning and write out his prescription: I do not ask more of men or of physicians.' Dr Middleton said this rising, glancing at the clock and at the back of his hands. 'Quod autem secundum litteras difficillimum esse artificium? But what after letters is the more difficult practice? Ego puto medicum. The medicus next to the scholar: though I have not to my recollection required him next me, nor ever expected child of mine to be crying for that milk. Daughter she is – of the unexplained sex: we will send a messenger for Corney. Change, my dear, you will speedily have, to satisfy the most craving of women, if Willoughby, as I suppose, is in the neoteric fashion of spending a honeymoon on a railway: apt image, exposition and perpetuation of the state of mania conducting to the institution! In my time we lay by to brood on happiness; we had no thought of chasing it over a continent, mistaking hurly-burly clothed in dust for the divinity we sought. A smaller generation sacrifices to excitement. Dust and hurly-burly must perforce be the issue. And that is your modern world. Now, my dear, let us go and wash our hands. Midday-bells expect immediate attention. They know of no anteroom of assembly.'

Clara stood gathered up, despairing at opportunity lost. He had noticed her contracted shape and her eyes, and had talked magisterially to smother and overbear the something disagreeable prefigured in her appearance.

'You do not despise your girl, father?'

'I do not; I could not; I love her; I love my girl. But you need not sing to me like a gnat to propound that

question, my dear.'

'Then, father, tell Willoughby to-day we have to leave to-morrow. You shall return in time for Mrs Mountstuart's dinner. Friends will take us in, the Darletons, the Erpinghams. We can go to Oxford, where you are sure of welcome. A little will recover me. Do not mention doctors. But you see I am nervous. I am quite ashamed of it; I am well enough to laugh at it, only I cannot overcome it; and I feel that a day or two will restore me. Say you will. Say it in First-Lesson-Book language; anything above a primer splits my foolish head to-day.'

Dr Middleton shrugged, spreading out his arms.

'The office of embassador from you to Willoughby, Clara? You decree me to the part of ball between two bats. The Play being assured, the prologue is a bladder of wind. I seem to be instructed in one of the mysteries of erotic esotery, yet on my word I am no wiser. If Willoughby is to hear anything from you, he will hear it from your lips.'

'Yes, father, yes. We have differences. I am not fit for contests at present; my head is giddy. I wish to avoid an illness. He and I… I accuse myself.'

'There is the bell!' ejaculated Dr Middleton. 'I'll debate on it with Willoughby.'

'This afternoon?'

'Somewhen, before the dinner-bell. I cannot tie myself to the minute-hand of the clock, my dear child. And let me direct you, for the next occasion when you shall bring the vowels I and A, in verbally detached letters, into collision, that you do not fill the hiatus with so pronounced a Y. It is the vulgarization of our tongue of which I y-accuse you. I do not like my girl to be guilty of it.'

He smiled to moderate the severity of the correction, and kissed her forehead.

She declared her inability to sit and eat; she went to her room, after begging him very earnestly to send her the assurance that he had spoken. She had not shed a tear, and she rejoiced in her self-control; it whispered to her of true courage when she had given herself such evidence of the reverse.

Shower and sunshine alternated through the half-hours of the afternoon, like a procession of dark and fair holding hands and passing. The shadow came, and she was chill; the light yellow in moisture, and she buried her face not to be caught up by cheerfulness. Believing that her head ached, she afflicted herself with all the heavy symptoms, and oppressed her mind so thoroughly that its occupation was to speculate on Laetitia Dale's modest enthusiasm for rural pleasures, for this place especially, with its rich foliage and peeps of scenic peace. The prospect of an escape from it inspired thoughts of a loveable round of life where the sun was not a naked ball of fire, but a friend clothed in woodland; where park and meadow swept to well-known features East and West; and distantly circling hills, and the hearts of poor cottagers too – sympathy with whom assured her of goodness – were familiar, homely to the dweller in the place, morning and night. And she had the love of wild flowers, the watchful happiness in the seasons; poets thrilled her, books absorbed. She dwelt strongly on that sincerity of feeling; it gave her root in our earth; she needed it as

she pressed a hand on her eyeballs, conscious of acting the invalid, though the reasons she had for languishing under headache were so convincing that her brain refused to disbelieve in it and went some way to produce positive throbs. Otherwise she had no excuse for shutting herself in her room. Vernon Whitford would be sceptical. Headache or none, Colonel De Craye must be thinking strangely of her; she had not shown him any sign of illness. His laughter and his talk sung about her and dispersed the fiction; he was the very sea-wind for bracing unstrung nerves. Her ideas reverted to Sir Willoughby, and at once they had no more cohesion than the foam on a torrent-water.

But soon she was undergoing a variation of sentiment. Her maid Barclay brought her this pencilled line from her father:

'Factum est; laetus est; amantium irae, etc.'[16]

That it was done, that Willoughby had put on an air of glad acquiescence, and that her father assumed the existence of a lovers' quarrel, was wonderful to her at first sight, simple the succeeding minute. Willoughby indeed must be tired of her, glad of her going. He would know that it was not to return. She was grateful to him for perhaps hinting at the amantium irae, though she rejected the folly of the verse. And she gazed over dear homely country through her windows now. Happy the lady of the place, if happy she can be in her choice! Clara Middleton envied her the double-blossom wild cherry-tree, nothing else. One sprig of it, if it had not faded and gone to dust-colour like crusty Alpine snow in the lower hollows, and then she could depart, bearing away a memory of the best here! Her fiction of the headache pained her no longer. She changed her muslin dress for silk; she was contented with the first bonnet Barclay presented. Amicable toward every one in the house, Willoughby included, she threw up her window, breathed, blessed

mankind; and she thought: ‘If Willoughby would open his heart to nature, he would be relieved of his wretched opinion of the world.’ Nature was then sparkling

refreshed in the last drops of a sweeping rain-curtain, favourably disposed for a background to her joyful optimism. A little nibble of hunger within, real hunger, unknown to her of late, added to this healthy view, without precipitating her to appease it; she was more inclined to foster it, for the sake of the sinewy activity of mind and limb it gave her; and in the style of young ladies very light of heart, she went downstairs like a cascade, and like the meteor observed in its vanishing trace she alighted close to Colonel De Craye and entered one of the rooms off the hall.

He cocked an eye at the half-shut door.

Now you have only to be reminded that it is the habit of the sportive gentleman of easy life, bewildered as he would otherwise be by the tricks, twists, and windings of the hunted sex, to parcel out fair women into classes; and some are flyers and some are runners; these birds are wild on the wing, those exposed their bosoms to the shot. For him there is no individual woman. He grants her a characteristic only to enroll her in a class. He is our immortal dunce at learning to distinguish her as a personal variety, of a separate growth.

Colonel De Craye’s cock of the eye at the door said that he had seen a rageing coquette go behind it. He had his excuse for forming the judgement. She had spoken strangely of the fall of his wedding-present, strangely of Willoughby; or there was a sound of strangeness in an allusion to her appointed husband: and she had treated Willoughby strangely when they met. Above all, her word about Flitch was curious. And then that look of hers! And subsequently she transferred her polite attentions to Willoughby’s friend. After a charming colloquy, the sweetest give and take rattle he had ever enjoyed with a girl, she developed headache to avoid him; and next she developed blindness, for the same purpose.

He was feeling hurt, but considered it preferable to feel challenged.

Miss Middleton came out of another door. She had seen him when she had passed him and when it was too late to convey her recognition; and now she addressed him with an air of having bowed as she went by.

‘No one?’ she said. ‘Am I alone in the house?’

‘There is a figure naught,’ said he, ‘but it’s as good as annihilated, and no figure at all, if you put yourself on the wrong side of it, and wish to be alone in the house.’

‘Where is Willoughby?’

‘Away on business.’

‘Riding?’

‘Achmet is the horse, and pray don’t let him be sold, Miss Middleton. I am deputed to attend on you.’

‘I should like a stroll.’

‘Are you perfectly restored?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Strong?’

‘I was never better.’

‘It was the answer of the ghost of the wicked old man’s wife when she came to persuade him he had one chance remaining. Then, says he, I’ll believe in heaven if ye’ll stop that bottle, and hurls it; and the bottle broke and he committed suicide, not without suspicion of her laying a trap for him. These showers curling away and leaving sweet scents are divine, Miss Middleton. I have the privilege of the Christian name on the nuptial-day. This park of Willoughby’s is one of the best things in England. There’s a glimpse over the lake that smokes of a corner of Killarney; tempts the eye to dream, I mean.’ De Craye wound his finger spirally upward, like a smoke-wreath. ‘Are you for Irish scenery?’

‘Irish, English, Scottish.’

‘All’s one so long as it’s beautiful: yes, you speak for me. Cosmopolitanism of races is a different affair. I beg leave to doubt the true union of some; Irish and Saxon, for example, let Cupid be master of the ceremonies and the dwelling-place of the happy couple at the mouth of a Cornucopia. Yet I have seen a flower of Erin worn by a Saxon gentleman proudly; and the Hibernian courting a Rowena! So we’ll undo what I said, and consider it cancelled.’

‘Are you of the rebel party, Colonel De Craye?’

‘I am Protestant and Conservative, Miss Middleton.’

‘I have not a head for politics.’

‘The political heads I have seen would tempt me to that opinion.’

‘Did Willoughby say when he would be back?’

‘He named no particular time. Doctor Middleton and Mr Whitford are in the library upon a battle of the books.’

‘Happy battle!’

‘You are accustomed to scholars. They are rather intolerant of us poor fellows.’

‘Of ignorance perhaps; not of persons.’

‘Your father educated you himself, I presume?’

‘He gave me as much Latin as I could take. The fault is mine that it is little.’

‘Greek?’

‘A little Greek.’

‘Ah! And you carry it like a feather.’

‘Because it is so light.’

‘Miss Middleton, I could sit down to be instructed, old as I am. When women beat us, I verily believe we are the most beaten dogs in existence. You like the theatre?’

‘Ours?’

‘Acting, then.’

‘Good acting, of course.’

‘May I venture to say you would act admirably?’

‘The venture is bold, for I have never tried.’

‘Let me see; there is Miss Dale and Mr Whitford; you and I; sufficient for a two-act piece. THE IRISHMAN IN SPAIN would do.’ He bent to touch the grass as she stepped on it. ‘The lawn is wet.’

She signified that she had no dread of wet, and said: ‘English women afraid of the weather might as well be shut up.’

De Craye proceeded: ‘Patrick O’Neill passes over from Hibernia to Iberia, a disinherited son of a father in the claws of the lawyers, with a letter of introduction to Don Beltran d’Arragon, a Grandee of the First Class, who has a daughter Doña Seraphina (Miss Middleton), the proudest beauty of her day, in the custody of a dueña (Miss Dale), and plighted to Don Fernan, of the Guzman family (Mr Whitford). There you have our dramatis personae.’

‘You are Patrick?’

‘Patrick himself. And I lose my letter, and I stand on the Prado of Madrid with the last portrait of Britannia in the palm of my hand, and crying in the purest brogue of my native land: “It’s all through dropping a letter I’m here in Iberia instead of Hibernia, worse luck to the spelling!”

‘But Patrick will be sure to aspirate the initial letter of Hibernia.’

‘That is clever criticism, upon my word, Miss Middleton! So he would. And there we have two letters dropped. But he’d do it in a groan, so that it wouldn’t count for more than a ghost of one; and everything goes on the stage, since it’s only the laugh we want on the brink of the action. Besides you are to suppose the performance before a London audience, who have a native opposite to the aspirate and wouldn’t bear to hear him spoil a joke, as if he were a lord or a constable. It’s an instinct of the English democracy. So with my bit of coin turning over and over in an undecided way, whether it shall commit suicide to supply me a supper, I behold a pair of Spanish eyes like violet lightning in the black heavens of that favoured clime. Won’t you have violet?’

‘Violet forbids my impersonation.’

‘But the lustre on black is dark violet blue.’

‘You remind me that I have no pretension to black.’

Colonel De Craye permitted himself to take a flitting gaze at Miss Middleton’s eyes. ‘Chestnut,’ he said. ‘Well, and Spain is the land of chestnuts.’

‘Then it follows that I am a daughter of Spain.’

‘Clearly.’

‘Logically?’

‘By positive deduction.’

‘And do I behold Patrick?’

‘As one looks upon a beast of burden.’

‘Oh!’

Miss Middleton's exclamation was louder than the matter of the dialogue seemed to require. She caught her hands up.

In the line of the outer extremity of the rhododendron, screened from the house windows, young Crossjay lay at his length, with his head resting on a doubled arm, and his ivy-wreathed hat on his cheek, just where she had left him, commanding him to stay. Half-way toward him up the lawn, she saw the poor boy, and the spur of that pitiful sight set her gliding swiftly. Colonel De Craye followed, pulling an end of his moustache.

Crossjay jumped to his feet.

'My dear, dear Crossjay!' she addressed him and reproached him. 'And how hungry you must be! And you must be drenched! This is really too bad.'

'You told me to wait here,' said Crossjay, in shy self-defence.

'I did, and you should not have done it, foolish boy! I told him to wait for me here before luncheon, Colonel De Craye, and the foolish, foolish boy! – he has had nothing to eat, and he must have been wet through two or three times: – because I did not come to him!'

'Quite right. And the lava might overflow him and take the mould of him, like the sentinel at Pompeii, if he's of the true stuff.'

'He may have caught cold, he may have a fever.'

'He was under your orders to stay.'

'I know, and I cannot forgive myself. Run in, Crossjay, and change your clothes. Oh, run, run to Mrs Montague, and get her to give you a warm bath, and tell her from me to prepare some dinner for you. And change every garment you have. This is unpardonable of me. I said – "not for politics!" – I begin to think I have not a head for anything. But could it be imagined that Crossjay would not move for the dinner-bell! through all that rain! I forgot you, Crossjay. I am so sorry; so sorry! You shall make me pay any forfeit you like. Remember, I am deep, deep in your debt. And now let me see you run fast. You shall come in to dessert this evening.'

Crossjay did not run. He touched her hand.

'You said something?'

'What did I say, Crossjay?'

'You promised.'

'What did I promise?'

'Something.'

'Name it, my dear boy.'

He mumbled, '… kiss me.'

Clara plumped down on him, enveloped him and kissed him.

The affectionately remorseful impulse was too quick for a conventional note of admonition to arrest her from paying that portion of her debt. When she had sped him off to Mrs Montague, she was in a blush.

'Dear, dear Crossjay!' she said, sighing.

'Yes, he's a good lad,' remarked the colonel. 'The fellow may well be a faithful soldier and stick to his post, if he receives promise of such a solde. He is a great favourite with you.'

'He is. You will do him a service by persuading Willoughby to send him to one of those men who get boys through their naval examination. And, Colonel De Craye, will you be kind enough to ask at the dinner-table that Crossjay may come in to dessert?'

'Certainly,' said he, wondering.

'And will you look after him while you are here? See that no one spoils him. If you could get him away before you leave, it would be much to his advantage. He is born for the navy and should be preparing to enter it now.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said De Craye, wondering more.

'I thank you in advance.'

'Shall I not be usurping…?'

'No, we leave to-morrow.'

'For a day?'

'For longer.'

'Two?'

‘It will be longer.’

‘A week? I shall not see you again?’

‘I fear not.’

Colonel De Craye controlled his astonishment; he smothered a sensation of veritable pain, and amiably said: ‘I feel a blow, but I am sure you would not willingly strike. We are all involved in the regrets.’

Miss Middleton spoke of having to see Mrs Montague, the housekeeper, with reference to the bath for Crossjay, and stepped off the grass. He bowed, watched her a moment, and for parallel reasons, running close enough to hit one mark, he commiserated his friend Willoughby. The winning or the losing of that young lady struck him as equally lamentable for Willoughby.

CHAPTER 20

An Aged and a Great Wine

THE leisurely promenade up and down the lawn with ladies and deferential gentlemen, in anticipation of the dinner-bell, was Dr Middleton’s evening pleasure. He walked as one who had formerly danced (in Apollo’s time and the young god Cupid’s), elastic on the muscles of the calf and foot, bearing his broad iron-grey head in grand elevation. The hard labour of the day approved the cooling exercise and the crowning refreshments of French cookery and wines of known vintages. He was happy at that hour in dispensing wisdom or nugae[17] to his hearers, like the Western sun whose habit it is, when he is fairly treated, to break out in quiet splendours, which by no means exhaust his treasury. Blessed indeed above his fellows, by the height of the bow-winged bird in a fair weather sunset sky above the pecking sparrow, is he that ever in the recurrent evening of his day sees the best of it ahead and soon to come. He has the rich reward of a youth and manhood of virtuous living. Dr Middleton misdoubted the future as well as the past of the man who did not, in becoming gravity, exult to dine. That man he deemed unfit for this world and the next.

An example of the good fruit of temperance, he had a comfortable pride in his digestion, and his political sentiments were attuned by his veneration of the Powers rewarding virtue. We must have a stable world where this is to be done.

The Rev. Doctor was a fine old picture; a specimen of art peculiarly English; combining in himself piety and epicurism, learning and gentlemanliness, with good room for each and a seat at one another’s table: for the rest, a strong man, an athlete in his youth, a keen reader of facts and no reader of persons, genial, a giant at a task, a steady worker besides, but easily discomposed. He loved his daughter and he feared her. However much he liked her character, the dread of her sex and age was constantly present to warn him that he was not tied to perfect sanity while the damsel Clara remained unmarried. Her mother had been an amiable woman, of the poetical temperament nevertheless, too enthusiastic, imaginative, impulsive, for the repose of a sober scholar; an admirable woman, still, as you see, a woman, a fire-work. The girl resembled her. Why should she wish to run away from Patterne Hall for a single hour? Simply because she was of the sex born mutable and explosive. A husband was her proper custodian, justly relieving a father. With demagogues abroad and daughters at home, philosophy is needed for us to keep erect. Let the girl be Cicero’s Tullia: well, she dies! The choicest of them will furnish us examples of a strange perversity.

Miss Dale was beside Dr Middleton. Clara came to them and took the other side.

‘I was telling Miss Dale that the signal for your subjection is my enfranchisement,’ he said to her, sighing and smiling. ‘We know the date. The date of an event to come certifies to it as a fact to be counted on.’

‘Are you anxious to lose me?’ Clara faltered.

‘My dear, you have planted me on a field where I am to expect the trumpet, and when it blows I shall be quit of my nerves, no more.’

Clara found nothing to seize on for a reply in these words She thought upon the silence of Laetitia.

Sir Willoughby advanced, appearing in a cordial mood.

‘I need not ask you whether you are better,’ he said to Clara sparkled to Laetitia, and raised a key to the level of Dr Middleton’s breast, remarking, ‘I am going down to my inner cellar.

‘An inner cellar!’ exclaimed the doctor.

‘Sacred from the butler. It is interdicted to Stoneman Shall I offer myself as guide to you? My cellars are

worth a visit.'

'Cellars are not catacombs. They are, if rightly constructed rightly considered, cloisters, where the bottle meditates on joys to bestow, not on dust misused! Have you anything great?'

'A wine aged ninety.'

'Is it associated with your pedigree that you pronounce the age with such assurance?'

'My grandfather inherited it.'

'Your grandfather, Sir Willoughby, had meritorious offspring, not to speak of generous progenitors. What would have happened had it fallen into the female line! I shall be glad to accompany you. Port? Hermitage?'

'Port.'

'Ah! We are in England!'

'There will just be time,' said Sir Willoughby, inducing Dr Middleton to step out.

A chirrup was in the reverend doctor's tone: 'Hocks, too, have compassed age. I have tasted senior Hocks. Their flavours are as a brook of many voices; they have depth also. Senatorial Port! we say. We cannot say that of any other wine. Port is deep-sea deep. It is in its flavour deep; mark the difference. It is like a classic tragedy, organic in conception. An ancient Hermitage has the light of the antique; the merit that it can grow to an extreme old age; a merit. Neither of Hermitage nor of Hock can you say that it is the blood of those long years, retaining the strength of youth with the wisdom of age. To Port for that! Port is our noblest legacy! Observe, I do not compare the wines; I distinguish the qualities. Let them live together for our enrichment; they are not rivals like the Idaean Three.[18] Were they rivals, a fourth would challenge them. Burgundy has great genius. It does wonders within its period; it does all except to keep up in the race; it is short-lived. An aged Burgundy runs with a beardless Port. I cherish the fancy that Port speaks the sentences of wisdom, Burgundy sings the inspired Ode. Or put it, that Port is the Homeric hexameter, Burgundy the pindaric dithyramb. What do you say?'

'The comparison is excellent, sir.'

'The distinction, you would remark. Pindar astounds. But his elder brings us the more sustaining cup. One is a fountain of prodigious ascent. One is the unsounded purple sea of marching billows.'

'A very fine distinction.'

'I conceive you to be now commending the similes. They pertain to the time of the first critics of those poets. Touch the Greeks, and you can nothing new; all has been said: Graiis… praeter, laudem nullius avaris.[19] Genius dedicated to Fame is immortal. We, sir, dedicate genius to the cloacaline floods. We do not address the unforgetting gods, but the popular stomach.'

Sir Willoughby was patient. He was about as accordantly coupled with Dr Middleton in discourse as a drum duetting with a bass-viol; and when he struck in he received correction from the paedagogue-instrument. If he thumped affirmative or negative, he was wrong. However, he knew scholars to be an unmannered species; and the doctor's learnedness would be a subject to dilate on.

In the cellar, it was the turn for the drum. Dr Middleton was tongue-tied there. Sir Willoughby gave the history of his wine in heads of chapters; whence it came to the family originally, and how it had come down to him in the quantity to be seen. 'Curiously, my grandfather, who inherited it, was a water-drinker. My father died early.'

'Indeed! Dear me!' the doctor ejaculated in astonishment and condolence. The former glanced at the contrariety of man, the latter embraced his melancholy destiny.

He was impressed with respect for the family. This cool vaulted cellar, and the central square block, or enceinte, where the thick darkness was not penetrated by the intruding lamp, but rather took it as an eye, bore witness to forethoughtful practical solidity in the man who had built the house on such foundations. A house having a great wine stored below lives in our imaginations as a joyful house, fast and splendidly rooted in the soil. And imagination has a place for the heir of the house. His grandfather a water-drinker, his father dying early, present circumstances to us arguing predestination to an illustrious heirship and career. Dr Middleton's musings were coloured by the friendly vision of glasses of the great wine; his mind was festive; it pleased him, and he chose to indulge in his whimsical, robustious, grandiose-airy style of thinking: from which the festive mind will sometimes take a certain print that we cannot obliterate immediately. Expectation is grateful, you know; in the mood of gratitude we are waxen. And he was a self-humouring gentleman.

He liked Sir Willoughby's tone in ordering the servant at his heels to take up 'those two bottles': it prescribed, without overdoing it, a proper amount of caution, and it named an agreeable number.

Watching the man's hand keenly, he said:

'But here is the misfortune of a thing super-excellent: – not more than one in twenty will do it justice.'

Sir Willoughby replied: 'Very true, sir; and I think we may pass over the nineteen.'

'Women, for example; and most men.'

'This wine would be a sealed book to them.'

'I believe it would. It would be a grievous waste.'

'Vernon is a claret man; and so is Horace De Craye. They are both below the mark of this wine. They will join the ladies. Perhaps you and I, sir, might remain together.'

'With the utmost good-will on my part.'

'I am anxious for your verdict, sir.'

'You shall have it, sir, and not out of harmony with the chorus preceding me, I can predict. Cool, not frigid.' Dr Middleton summed the attributes of the cellar on quitting it. 'North side and South. No musty damp. A pure air. Everything requisite. One might lie down one's self and keep sweet here.'

Of all our venerable British of the two Isles professing a suckling attachment to an ancient port-wine, lawyer, doctor, squire, rosy admiral, city merchant, the classic scholar is he whose blood is most nuptial to the webbed bottle. The reason must be, that he is full of the old poets. He has their spirit to sing with, and the best that Time has done on earth to feed it. He may also perceive a resemblance in the wine to the studious mind, which is the obverse of our mortality, and throws off acids and crusty particles in the piling of the years, until it is fulgent by clarity. Port hymns to his conservatism. It is magical: at one sip he is off swimming in the purple flood of the ever-youthful antique.

By comparison, then, the enjoyment of others is brutish; they have not the soul for it; but he is worthy of the wine, as arc poets of Beauty. In truth, these should be severally apportioned to them, scholar and poet, as his own good thing. Let it be so.

Meanwhile Dr Middleton sipped.

After the departure of the ladies, Sir Willoughby had practised a studied curtness upon Vernon and Horace.

'You drink claret,' he remarked to them, passing it round. 'Port, I think, Doctor Middleton? The wine before you may serve for a preface. We shall have *your* wine in five minutes.'

The claret jug empty, Sir Willoughby offered to send for more. De Craye was languid over the question. Vernon rose from the table.

'We have a bottle of Doctor Middleton's port coming in,' Willoughby said to him.

'Mine, you call it?' cried the doctor.

'It's a royal wine, that won't suffer sharing,' said Vernon.

'We'll be with you, if you go into the billiard-room, Vernon.'

'I shall hurry my drinking of good wine for no man,' said the Rev. Doctor.

'Horace?'

'I'm beneath it, ephemeral, Willoughby. I am going to the ladies.'

Vernon and De Craye retired upon the arrival of the wine; and Dr Middleton sipped. He sipped and looked at the owner of it.

'Some thirty dozen?' he said.

'Fifty.'

The doctor nodded humbly.

'I shall remember, sir,' his host addressed him, 'whenever I have the honour of entertaining you, I am cellarer of that wine.'

The Rev. Doctor set down his glass. 'You have, sir, in some sense, an enviable post. It is a responsible one, if that be a blessing. On you it devolves to retard the day of the last dozen.'

'Your opinion of the wine is favourable, sir?'

'I will say this: – shallow souls run to rhapsody: – I will say, that I am consoled for not having lived ninety years back, or at any period but the present, by this one glass of your ancestral wine.'

'I am careful of it,' Sir Willoughby said, modestly; 'still its natural destination is to those who can appreciate it. You do, sir.'

'Still my good friend, still! It is a charge; it is a possession, but part in trusteeship. Though we cannot declare it an entailed estate, our consciences are in some sort pledged that it shall be a succession not too

considerably diminished.'

'You will not object to drink it, sir, to the health of your grandchildren. And may you live to toast them in it on their marriage-day!'

'You colour the idea of a prolonged existence in seductive hues. Ha! It is a wine for Tithonus. This wine would speed him to the rosy Morning – aha!'

'I will undertake to sit you through it up to morning,' said Sir Willoughby, innocent of the Bacchic nuptiality of the allusion.

Dr Middleton eyed the decanter. There is a grief in gladness, for a premonition of our mortal state. The amount of wine in the decanter did not promise to sustain the starry roof of night and greet the dawn. 'Old wine, my friend, denies us the full bottle!'

'Another bottle is to follow.'

'No!'

'It is ordered.'

'I protest.'

'It is uncorked.'

'I entreat.'

'It is decanted.'

'I submit. But, mark, it must be honest partnership. You are my worthy host, sir, on that stipulation. Note the superiority of wine over Venus! – I may say, the magnanimity of wine; our jealousy turns on him that will not share! But the corks, Willoughby. The corks excite my amazement.'

'The corking is examined at regular intervals. I remember the occurrence in my father's time. I have seen to it once.'

'It must be perilous as an operation for tracheotomy; which I should assume it to resemble in surgical skill and firmness of hand, not to mention the imminent gasp of the patient.'

A fresh decanter was placed before the doctor.

He said: 'I have but a girl to give!' He was melted.

Sir Willoughby replied: 'I take her for the highest prize this world affords.'

'I have beaten some small stock of Latin into her head, and a note of Greek. She contains a savour of the classics. I hoped once… But she is a girl. The nymph of the woods is in her. Still she will bring you her flower-cup of Hippocrene. She has that aristocracy – the noblest. She is fair; a Beauty, some have said, who judge not by lines. Fair to me, Willoughby! She is my sky. There were applicants. In Italy she was besought of me. She has no history. You are the first heading of the chapter. With you she will have her one tale, as it should be. "Mulier tum bene olet", you know. Most fragrant she that smells of naught. She goes to you from me, from me alone, from her father to her husband. "Ut flos in septis secretus nascitur hortis." He murmured on the lines to "Sic virgo, dum – "[20] I shall feel the parting. She goes to one who will have my pride in her, and more. I will add, who will be envied. Mr Whitford must write you a Carmen Nuptiale.'

The heart of the unfortunate gentleman listening to Dr Middleton set in for irregular leaps. His offended temper broke away from the image of Clara, revealing her as he had seen her in the morning beside Horace De Craye, distressingly sweet; sweet with the breezy radiance of an English soft-breathing day; sweet with sharpness of young sap. Her eyes, her lips, her fluttering dress that played happy mother across her bosom, giving peeps of the veiled twins; and her laughter, her slim figure, peerless carriage, all her terrible sweetness touched his wound to the smarting quick.

Her wish to be free of him was his anguish. In his pain he thought sincerely. When the pain was easier he muffled himself in the idea of her jealousy of Laetitia Dale, and deemed the wish a fiction. But she had expressed it. That was the wound he sought to comfort; for the double reason, that he could love her better after punishing her, and that to meditate on doing so masked the fear of losing her – the dread abyss she had succeeded in forcing his nature to shudder at as a giddy edge possibly near, in spite of his arts of self-defence.

'What I shall do to-morrow evening!' he exclaimed. 'I do notcare to fling a bottle to Colonel De Craye and Vernon. I cannot open one for myself. To sit with the ladies will be sitting in the cold for me. When do you bring me back my bride, sir?'

'My dear Willoughby!' The Rev. Doctor puffed, composed himself, and sipped. 'The expedition is an absurdity. I am unable to see the aim of it. She had a headache, vapours. They are over, and she will show a return of good sense. I have ever maintained that nonsense is not to be encouraged in girls. *I* can put my foot on it. My arrangements are for staying here a further ten days, in the terms of your hospitable

invitation. And I stay.'

'I applaud your resolution, sir. Will you prove firm?'

'I am never false to my engagement, Willoughby.'

'Not under pressure?'

'Under no pressure.'

'Persuasion, I should have said.'

'Certainly not. The weakness is in the yielding, either to persuasion or to pressure. The latter brings weight to bear on us; the former blows at our want of it.'

'You gratify me, Doctor Middleton, and relieve me.'

'I cordially dislike a breach in good habits, Willoughby. But I do remember – was I wrong? – informing Clara that you appeared light-hearted in regard to a departure, or gap in a visit, that was not, I must confess, to my liking.'

'Simply, my dear doctor, your pleasure was my pleasure; but make my pleasure yours, and you remain to crack many a bottle with your son-in-law.'

'Excellently said. You have a courtly speech, Willoughby. I can imagine you to conduct a lovers' quarrel with a politeness to read a lesson to well-bred damsels. Aha?'

'Spare me the futility of the quarrel.'

'All's well?'

'Clara,' replied Sir Willoughby, in dramatic epigram, 'is perfection.'

'I rejoice,' the Rev. Doctor responded; taught thus to understand that the lovers' quarrel between his daughter and his host was at an end.

He left the table a little after eleven o'clock. A short dialogue ensued upon the subject of the ladies. They must have gone to bed? Why, yes; of course they must. It is good that they should go to bed early to preserve their complexions for us. Ladies are creation's glory, but they are anti-climax, following a wine of a century old. They are anti-climax, recoil, crosscurrent; morally, they are repentance, penance; imagerially, the frozen North on the young brown buds bursting to green. What know they of a critic in the palate and a frame all revelry! And mark you, revelry in sobriety, containment in exultation; classic revelry. Can they, dear though they be to us, light up candelabras in the brain, to illuminate all history and solve the secret of the destiny of man? They cannot; they cannot sympathize with them that can. So therefore this division is between us; yet are we not turbaned Orientals, nor are they inmates of the harem. We are not Moslem. Be assured of it in the contemplation of the table's decanter.

Dr Middleton said: 'Then I go straight to bed.'

'I will conduct you to your door, sir,' said his host.

The piano was heard. Dr Middleton laid his hand on the balusters, and remarked: 'The ladies must have gone to bed?'

Vernon came out of the library and was hailed, 'Fellow-student!'

He waved a good-night to the Doctor, and said to Willoughby: 'The ladies are in the drawing-room.'

'I am on my way upstairs,' was the reply.

'Solitude and sleep, after such a wine as that; and forefend us human society!' the Doctor shouted. 'But, Willoughby!'

'Sir.'

'*One* to-morrow.'

'You dispose of the cellar, sir.'

'I am fitter to drive the horses of the sun. I would rigidly counsel, one, and no more. We have made a breach in the fiftieth dozen. Daily one will preserve us from having to name the fortieth quite so unseasonably. The couple of bottles per diem prognosticates disintegration, with its accompanying recklessness. Constitutionally, let me add, I bear three. I speak for posterity.'

During Dr Middleton's allocution the ladies issued from the drawing-room, Clara foremost, for she had heard her father's voice, and desired to ask him this in reference to their departure: 'Papa, will you tell me the hour to-morrow?'

She ran up the stairs to kiss him, saying again: 'When will you be ready to-morrow morning?'

Dr Middleton announced a stoutly deliberative mind in the bugle-notes of a repeated ahem. He bethought him of replying in his doctorial tongue. Clara's eager face admonished him to brevity: it began to look starved. Intruding on his vision of the houris couched in the inner cellar to be the reward of valiant men, it

annoyed him. His brows joined. He said: ‘I shall not be ready to-morrow morning.’

‘In the afternoon?’

‘Nor in the afternoon.’

‘When?’

‘My dear, I am ready for bed at this moment, and know of no other readiness. Ladies,’ he bowed to the group in the hall below him, ‘may fair dreams pay court to you this night!’

Sir Willoughby had hastily descended and shaken the hands of the ladies, directed Horace De Craye to the laboratory for a smoking-room, and returned to Dr Middleton. Vexed by the scene, uncertain of his temper if he stayed with Clara, for whom he had arranged that her disappointment should take place on the morrow, in his absence, he said: ‘Good-night, good-night,’ to her, with due fervour, bending over her flaccid finger-tips; then offered his arm to the Rev. Doctor.

‘Ay, son Willoughby, in friendliness, if you will, though I am a man to bear my load,’ the father of the stupefied girl addressed him. ‘Candles, I believe, are on the first landing. Good-night, my love. Clara!’

‘Papa!’

‘Good-night.’

‘Oh!’ she lifted her breast with the interjection, standing in shame of the curtained conspiracy and herself, ‘good-night’.

Her father wound up the stairs. She stepped down.

‘There was an understanding that papa and I should go to London to-morrow early,’ she said, unconcernedly, to the ladies, and her voice was clear, but her face too legible. De Craye was heartily unhappy at the sight.

CHAPTER 21

⌘⌘⌘⌘

Clara’s Meditations

Two were sleepless that night: Miss Middleton and Colonel De Craye.

She was in a fever, lying like stone, with her brain burning. Quick natures run out to calamity in any little shadow of it flung before. Terrors of apprehension drive them. They stop not short of the uttermost when they are on the wings of dread. A frown means tempest, a wind wreck; to see fire is to be seized by it. When it is the approach of their loathing that they fear, they are in the tragedy of the embrace at a breath; and then is the wrestle between themselves and horror, between themselves and evil, which promises aid; themselves and weakness, which calls on evil; themselves and the better part of them, which whispers no beguilement.

The false course she had taken through sophistical cowardice appalled the girl; she was lost. The advantage taken of it by Willoughby put on the form of strength, and made her feel abject, reptilious; she was lost, carried away on the flood of the cataract. He had won her father for an ally. Strangely, she knew not how, he had succeeded in swaying her father, who had previously not more than tolerated him. ‘Son Willoughby’ on her father’s lips meant something that scenes and scenes would have to struggle with, to the out-wearying of her father and herself. She revolved the ‘Son Willoughby’ through moods of stupefaction, contempt, revolt, subjection. It meant that she was vanquished. It meant that her father’s esteem for her was forfeited. She saw him a gigantic image of discomposure.

Her recognition of her cowardly feebleness brought the brood of fatalism. What was the right of so miserable a creature as she to excite disturbance, let her fortunes be good or ill? It would be quieter to float, kinder to everybody. Thank heaven for the chances of a short life! Once in a net, desperation is graceless. We may be brutes in our earthly destinies: in our endurance of them we need not be brutish.

She was now in the luxury of passivity, when we throw our burden on the Powers above, and do not love them. The need to love them drew her out of it, that she might strive with the unbearable, and by sheer striving, even though she were graceless, come to love them humbly. It is here that the seed of good teaching supports a soul, for the condition might be mapped, and where kismet whispers us to shut eyes, and instruction bids us look up, is at a well-marked cross-road of the contest.

Quick of sensation, but not courageously resolved, she perceived how blunderingly she had acted. For a

punishment, it seemed to her that she who had not known her mind must learn to conquer her nature, and submit. She had accepted Willoughby; therefore she accepted him. The fact became a matter of the past, past debating.

In the abstract this contemplation of circumstances went well. A plain duty lay in her way. And then a disembodied thought flew round her, comparing her with Vernon to her discredit. He had for years borne much that was distasteful to him, for the purpose of studying, and with his poor income helping the poorer than himself. She dwelt on him in pity and envy; he had lived in this place, and so must she; and he had not been dishonoured by his modesty: he had not failed of self-control, because he had a life within. She was almost imagining she might imitate him, when the clash of a sharp physical thought, 'The difference! the difference!' told her she was woman and never could submit. Can a woman have an inner life apart from him she is yoked to? She tried to nestle deep away in herself: in some corner where the abstract view had comforted her, to flee from thinking as her feminine blood directed. It was a vain effort. The difference, the cruel fate, the defencelessness of women, pursued her, strung her to wild horses' backs, tossed her on savage wastes. In her case duty was shame: hence, it could not be broadly duty. That intolerable difference proscribed the word.

But the fire of a brain burning high and kindling everything lighted up herself against herself: – Was one so volatile as she a person with a will? – Were they not a multitude of flitting wishes that she took for a will? Was she, feather-headed that she was, a person to make a stand on physical pride? – If she could yield her hand without reflection (as she conceived she had done, from incapacity to conceive herself doing it reflectively) was she much better than purchaseable stuff that has nothing to say to the bargain?

Furthermore, said her incandescent reason, she had not suspected such art of cunning in Willoughby. Then might she not be deceived altogether – might she not have misread him? Stronger than she had fancied, might he not be likewise more estimable? The world was favourable to him; he was prized by his friends.

She reviewed him. It was all in one flash. It was not much less intentionally favourable than the world's review and that of his friends, but, beginning with the idea of them, she recollected – heard Willoughby's voice pronouncing his opinion of his friends and the world; of Vernon Whitford and Colonel De Craye for example, and of men and women. An undefined agreement to have the same regard for him as his friends and the world had, provided that he kept at the same distance from her, was the termination of this phase, occupying about a minute in time, and reached through a series of intensely vivid pictures: – his face, at her petition to be released, lowering behind them for a background and a comment.

'I cannot! I cannot!' she cried, aloud; and it struck her that her repulsion was a holy warning. Better be graceless than a loathing wife: better appear inconsistent. Why should she not appear such as she was?

Why? We answer that question usually in angry reliance on certain superb qualities, injured fine qualities of ours undiscovered by the world, not much more than suspected by ourselves, which are still our fortress, where pride sits at home, solitary and impervious as an octogenarian conservative. But it is not possible to answer it so when the brain is rageing like a pine-torch and the devouring illumination leaves not a spot of our nature covert. The aspect of her weakness was unrelieved, and frightened her back to her loathing. From her loathing, as soon as her sensations had quickened to realize it, she was hurled on her weakness. She was graceless, she was inconsistent, she was volatile, she was unprincipled, she was worse than a prey to wickedness – capable of it; she was only waiting to be misled. Nay, the idea of being misled suffused her with languor; for then the battle would be over and she a happy weed of the sea no longer suffering those tugs at the roots, but leaving it to the sea to heave and contend. She would be like Constantia then: like her in her fortunes: never so brave, she feared.

Perhaps very like Constantia in her fortunes!

Poor troubled bodies waking up in the night to behold visually the spectre cast forth from the perplexed machinery inside them, stare at it for a space, till touching consciousness they dive down under the sheets with fish-like alacrity. Clara looked at her thought, and suddenly headed downward in a crimson gulf.

She must have obtained absolution, or else it was oblivion below. Soon after the plunge her first object of meditation was Colonel De Craye. She thought of him calmly: he seemed a refuge. He was very nice, he was a holiday character. His lithe figure, neat firm footing of the stag, swift intelligent expression, and his ready frolicsomeness, pleasant humour, cordial temper, and his Irishry, whereon he was at liberty to play, as on the emblem harp of the Isle, were soothing to think of. The suspicion that she tricked herself with this calm observation of him was dismissed. Issuing out of torture, her young nature eluded the irradiating brain in search of refreshment, and she luxuriated at a feast in considering him – shower on a parched land that he was! He spread new air abroad. She had no reason to suppose he was not a good man: she could securely think of him. Besides he was bound by his prospective office in support of his friend Willoughby to be quite

harmless. And besides (you are not to expect logical sequences) the showery refreshment in thinking of him lay in the sort of assurance it conveyed, that the more she thought, the less would he be likely to figure as an obnoxious official – that is, as the man to do by Willoughby at the altar what her father would, under the supposition, be doing by her. Her mind reposed on Colonel De Craye.

His name was Horace. Her father had worked with her at Horace. She knew most of the Odes and some of the Satires and Epistles of the poet. They reflected benevolent beams on the gentleman of the poet's name. He too was vivacious, had fun, common sense, elegance; loved rusticity, he said, sighed for a country life, fancied retiring to Canada to cultivate his own domain; 'modus agri non ita magnus';[21] a delight. And he, too, when in the country, sighed for town. There were strong features of resemblance. He had hinted in fun at not being rich. 'Quae virtus et quanta sit rivere parvo.'[22] But that quotation applied to and belonged to Vernon Whitford. Even so little disarranged her meditations.

She would have thought of Vernon, as her instinct of safety prompted, had not his exactions been excessive. He proposed to help her with advice only. She was to do everything for herself, do and dare everything, decide upon everything. He told her flatly that so would she learn to know her own mind; and flatly, that it was her penance. She had gained nothing by breaking down and pouring herself out to him. He would have her bring Willoughby and her father face to face, and be witness of their interview – herself the theme. What alternative was there? – obedience to the word she had pledged. He talked of patience, of self-examination and patience. But all of her – she was all marked *urgent*. This house was a cage, and the world – her brain was a cage, until she could obtain her prospect of freedom.

As for the house, she might leave it; yonder was the dawn.

She went to her window to gaze at the first colour along the grey. Small satisfaction came of gazing at that or at herself. She shunned glass and sky. One and the other stamped her as a slave in a frame. It seemed to her she had been so long in this place that she was fixed here: it was her world, and to imagine an Alp was like seeking to get back to childhood. Unless a miracle intervened here she would have to pass her days. Men are so little chivalrous now that no miracle ever intervenes. Consequently she was doomed.

She took a pen and began a letter to a dear friend, Lucy Darleton, a promised bridesmaid, bidding her countermand orders for her bridal dress, and purposing a tour in Switzerland. She wrote of the mountain country with real abandonment to imagination. It became a visioned loophole of escape. She rose and clasped a shawl over her night-dress to ward off chillness, and sitting to the table again, could not produce a word. The lines she had written were condemned: they were ludicrously inefficient. The letter was torn to pieces. She stood very clearly doomed.

After a fall of tears, upon looking at the scraps, she dressed herself, and sat by the window and watched the blackbird on the lawn as he hopped from shafts of dewy sunlight to the long-stretched dewy tree-shadows, considering in her mind that dark dews are more meaningful than bright, the beauty of the dews of woods more sweet than meadow-dews. It signified only that she was quieter. She had gone through her crisis in the anticipation of it. That is how quick natures will often be cold and hard, or not much moved, when the positive crisis arrives, and why it is that they are prepared for astonishing leaps over the gradations which should render their conduct comprehensible to us, if not excuseable. She watched the blackbird throw up his head stiff, and peck to right and left,

dangling the worm on each side his orange beak. Speckle-breasted thrushes were at work, and a wagtail that ran as with Clara's own rapid little steps. Thrush and blackbird flew to the nest. They had wings. The lovely morning breathed of sweet earth into her open window, and made it painful, in the dense twitter, chirp, cheep, and song of the air, to resist the innocent intoxication. O to love! was not said by her, but if she had sung, as her nature prompted, it would have been. Her war with Willoughby sprang of a desire to love repelled by distaste. Her cry for freedom was a cry to be free to love: she discovered it, half shuddering: to love, oh! no – no shape of man, nor impalpable nature either: but to love unselfishness, and helpfulness, and planted strength in something. Then,

loving and being loved a little, what strength would be hers! She could utter all the words needed to Willoughby and to her father, locked in her love: walking in this world, living in that.

Previously she had cried, despairing: If I were loved! Jealousy of Constantia's happiness, envy of her escape, ruled her then: and she remembered the cry, though not perfectly her plain-speaking to herself: she chose to think she had meant: If Willoughby were capable of truly loving! For now the fire of her brain had sunk, and refuges and subterfuges were round about it. The thought of personal love was encouraged, she chose to think, for the sake of the strength it lent her to carve her way to freedom. She had just before felt rather the reverse, but she could not exist with that feeling; and it was true that freedom was not so indistinct in her fancy as the idea of love.

Were men, when they were known, like him she knew too well?

The arch-tempter's question to her was there.

She put it away. Wherever she turned it stood observing her. She knew so much of one man, nothing of the rest: naturally she was curious. Vernon might be sworn to be unlike. But he was exceptional. What of the other in the house?

Maidens are commonly reduced to read the masters of their destinies by their instincts; and when these have been edged by over-activity they must hoodwink their maidenliness to suffer themselves to read; and then they must dupe their minds, else men would soon see they were gifted to discern. Total ignorance being their pledge of purity to men, they have to expunge the writing of their perceptives on the tablets of the brain: they have to know not when they do know. The instinct of seeking to know, crossed by the task of blotting knowledge out, creates that conflict of the natural with the artificial creature to which their ultimately revealed doubleface, complained of by ever-dissatisfied men, is owing. Wonder in no degree that they indulge a craving to be fools, or that many of them act the character. Jeer at them as little for not showing growth. You have reared them to this pitch, and at this pitch they have partly civilized you. Supposing you to want it done wholly, you must yield just as many points in your requisitions as are needed to let the wits of young women reap their due harvest and be of good use to their souls. You will then have a fair battle, a braver, with better results.

Clara's inner eye traversed Colonel De Craye at a shot.

She had immediately to blot out the vision of Captain Oxford in him, the revelation of his laughing contempt for Willoughby, the view of mercurial principles, the scribbled histories of light love-passages.

She blotted it out, kept it from her mind: so she knew him, knew him to be a sweeter and a variable Willoughby, a generous kind of Willoughby, a Willoughby-butterfly, without having the free mind to summarize him and picture him for a warning. Scattered features of him, such as the instincts call up, were not sufficiently impressive. Besides, the clouded mind was opposed to her receiving impressions.

Young Crossjay's voice in the still morning air came to her ears. The dear guileless chatter of the boy's voice. Why, assuredly it was young Crossjay who was the man she loved. And he loved her. And he was going to be an unselfish, sustaining, true, strong man, the man she longed for, for anchorage. Oh, the dear voice! woodpecker and thrush in one. He never ceased to chatter to Vernon Whitford walking beside him with a swinging stride off to the lake for their morning swim. Happy couple! The morning gave them both a freshness and innocence above human. They seemed to Clara made of morning air and clear lake water. Crossjay's voice ran up and down a diatonic scale with here and there a query in semitone and a laugh on a ringing note. She wondered what he could have to talk of so incessantly, and imagined all the dialogue. He prattled of his yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow, which did not imply past and future, but his vivid present. She felt like one vainly trying to fly in hearing him; she felt old. The consolation she arrived at was to feel maternal. She wished to hug the boy.

Trot and stride, Crossjay and Vernon entered the park, careless about wet grass, not once looking at the house. Crossjay ranged ahead and picked flowers, bounding back to show them. Clara's heart beat at a fancy that her name was mentioned. If those flowers were for her she would prize them.

The two bathers dipped over an undulation.

Her loss of them rattled her chains.

Deeply dwelling on their troubles has the effect upon the young of helping to forgetfulness; for they cannot think without imagining, their imaginations are saturated with their pleasures, and the collision, though they are unable to exchange sad for sweet, distills an opiate.

'Am I solemnly engaged?' she asked herself. She seemed to be awakening.

She glanced at her bed, where she had passed the night of ineffectual moaning, and out on the high wave of grass, where Crossjay and his good friend had vanished.

Was the struggle all to be gone over again?

Little by little her intelligence of her actual position crept up to submerge her heart.

'I am in his house!' she said. It resembled a discovery, so strangely had her opiate and power of dreaming wrought through her tortures. She said it gasping. She was in his house, his guest, his betrothed, sworn to him. The fact stood out cut in steel on the pitiless daylight.

That consideration drove her to be an early wanderer in the wake of Crossjay.

Her station was among the beeches on the flank of the boy's return; and while waiting there the novelty of her waiting to waylay anyone – she who had played the contrary part! – told her more than it pleased her to think. Yet she could admit that she did desire to speak with Vernon, as with a counsellor, harsh and curt, but wholesome.

The bathers reappeared on the grass-ridge, racing and flapping wet towels.

Some one hailed them. A sound of the galloping hoof drew her attention to the avenue. She saw Willoughby dash across the park level, and dropping a word to Vernon, ride away. Then she allowed herself to be seen.

Crossjay shouted. Willoughby turned his head, but not his horse's head. The boy sprang up to Clara. He had swum across the lake and back; he had raced Mr Whitford – and beaten him! How he wished Miss Middleton had been able to be one of them!

Clara listened to him enviously. Her thought was: We women are nailed to our sex!

She said: 'And you have just been talking to Sir Willoughby.'

Crossjay drew himself up to give an imitation of the baronet's hand-moving in adieu.

He would not have done that had he not smelled sympathy with the performance.

She declined to smile. Crossjay repeated it, and laughed. He made a broader exhibition of it to Vernon approaching: 'I say, Mr Whitford, who's this?'

Vernon doubled to catch him. Crossjay fled and resumed his magnificent air in the distance.

'Good-morning, Miss Middleton; you are out early,' said Vernon, rather pale and stringy from his cold swim, and rather hard-eyed with the sharp exercise following it.

She had expected some of the kindness she wanted to reject, for he could speak very kindly, and she regarded him as her doctor of medicine, who would at least present the futile drug.

'Good-morning,' she replied.

'Willoughby will not be home till the evening.'

'You could not have had a finer morning for your bath.'

'No.'

'I will walk as fast as you like.'

'I'm perfectly warm.'

'But you prefer fast walking.'

'Out.'

'Ah! yes, that I understand. The walk back! Why is Willoughby away to-day?'

'He has business.'

After several steps she said: 'He makes very sure of papa.'

'Not without reason, you will find,' said Vernon.

'Can it be? I am bewildered. I had papa's promise.'

'To leave the Hall for a day or two.'

'It would have been…'

'Possibly. But other heads are at work as well as yours. If you had been in earnest about it you would have taken your father into your confidence at once. That was the course I ventured to propose, on the supposition.'

'In earnest! I cannot imagine that you doubt it. I wished to spare him.'

'This is a case in which he can't be spared.'

'If I had been bound to any other. I did not know then *who* held me a prisoner. I thought I had only to speak to him sincerely.'

'Not many men would give up their prize for a word, Willoughby the last of any.'

'Prize' rang through her thrillingly from Vernon's mouth, and soothed her degradation.

She would have liked to protest that she was very little of a prize; a poor prize; not one at all in general estimation; only one to a man reckoning his property; no prize in the true sense.

The importunity of pain saved her.

'Does he think I can change again? Am I treated as something won in a lottery? To stay here is indeed more than I can bear. And if he is calculating – Mr Whitford, if he calculates on another change, his plotting to keep me here is inconsiderate, not very wise. Changes *may* occur in absence.'

'Wise or not, he has the right to scheme his best to keep you.'

She looked on Vernon with a shade of wondering reproach.

'Why? What right?'

'The right you admit when you ask him to release you. He has the right to think you deluded; and to think you may come to a better mood if you remain – a mood more agreeable to him, I mean. He has that right absolutely. You are bound to remember also that you stand in the wrong. You confess it when you

appeal to his generosity. And every man has the right to retain a treasure in his hand if he can. Look straight at these facts.'

'You expect me to be all reason!'

'Try to be. It's the way to learn whether you are really in earnest.'

'I will try. It will drive me to worse!'

'Try honestly. What is wisest now is, in my opinion, for you to resolve to stay. I speak in the character of the person you sketched for yourself as requiring. Well, then, a friend repeats the same advice. You might have gone with your father: now you will only disturb him and annoy him. The chances are he will refuse to go.'

'Are women ever so changeable as men, then! Papa consented; he agreed; he had some of my feeling; I saw it. That was yesterday. And at night. He spoke to each of us at night in a different tone from usual. With me he was hardly affectionate. But when you advise me to stay, Mr Whitford, you do not perhaps reflect that it would be at the sacrifice of all candour.'

'Regard it as a probational term.'

'It has gone too far with me.'

'Take the matter into the head: try the case there.'

'Are you not counselling me as if I were a woman of intellect?'

The crystal ring in her voice told him that tears were near to flowing.

He shuddered slightly. 'You have intellect,' he said, nodded, and crossed the lawn, leaving her. He had to dress.

She was not permitted to feel lonely, for she was immediately joined by Colonel De Craye.

CHAPTER 22

The Ride

CROSSJAY darted up to her a nose ahead of the colonel.

'I say, Miss Middleton, we're to have the whole day to ourselves, after morning lessons. Will you come and fish with me and see me bird's-nest?'

'Not for the satisfaction of beholding another cracked crown, my son,' the colonel interposed: and bowing to Clara: 'Miss Middleton is handed over to my exclusive charge for the day, with her consent?'

'I scarcely know,' said she, consulting a sensation of languor that seemed to contain some reminiscence. 'If I am here. My father's plans are uncertain. I will speak to him. If I am here, perhaps Crossjay would like a ride in the afternoon.'

'Oh, yes,' cried the boy; 'out over Bournden, through Mewsey up to Closham Beacon, and down on Aspenwell, where there's a common for racing. And ford the stream!'

'An inducement for you,' De Craye said to her.

She smiled and squeezed the boy's hand.

'We won't go without you, Crossjay.'

'You don't carry a comb, my man, when you bathe?'

At this remark of the colonel's young Crossjay conceived the appearance of his matted locks in the eyes of his adorable lady. He gave her one dear look through his redness, and fled.

'I like that boy,' said De Craye.

'I love him,' said Clara.

Crossjay's troubled eyelids in his honest young face became a picture for her.

'After all, Miss Middleton, Willoughby's notions about him are not so bad, if we consider that you will be in the place of a mother to him.'

'I think them bad.'

'You are disinclined to calculate the good fortune of the boy in having more of you on land than he would have in crown and anchor buttons!'

‘You have talked of him with Willoughby.’

‘We had a talk last night.’

Of how much? thought she.

‘Willoughby returns?’ she said.

‘He dines here, I know; for he holds the key of the inner cellar, and Doctor Middleton does him the honour to applaud his wine. Willoughby was good enough to tell me that he thought I might contribute to amuse you.’

She was brooding in stupefaction on her father and the wine as she requested Colonel De Craye to persuade Willoughby to take the general view of Crossjay’s future and act on it.

‘He seems fond of the boy, too,’ said De Craye, musingly.

‘You speak in doubt?’

‘Not at all. But is he not – men are queer fish! – make allowance for us – a trifle tyrannical, pleasantly, with those he is fond of?’

‘If they look right and left?’

It was meant for an interrogation; it was not with the sound of one that the words dropped. ‘My dear Crossjay!’ she sighed. ‘I would willingly pay for him out of my own purse, and I will do so rather than have him miss his chance. I have not mustered resolution to propose it.’

‘I may be mistaken, Miss Middleton. He talked of the boy’s fondness of him.’

‘He would.’

‘I suppose he is hardly peculiar in liking to play Pole-star.’

‘He may not be.’

‘For the rest, your influence should be all-powerful.’

‘It is not.’

De Craye looked with a wandering eye at the heavens.

‘We are having a spell of weather perfectly superb. And the odd thing is, that whenever we have splendid weather at home we’re all for rushing abroad. I’m booked for a Mediterranean cruise – postponed to give place to your ceremony.’

‘That?’ she could not control her accent.

‘What worthier?’

She was guilty of a pause.

De Craye saved it from an awkward length. ‘I have written half an essay on Honeymoons, Miss Middleton.’

‘Is that the same as a half-written essay, Colonel De Craye?’

‘Just the same, with the difference that it’s a whole essay written all on one side.’

‘On which side?’

‘The bachelor’s.’

‘Why does he trouble himself with such topics?’

‘To warm himself for being left out in the cold.’

‘Does he feel envy?’

‘He has to confess it.’

‘He has liberty.’

‘A commodity he can’t tell the value of if there’s no one to buy.’

‘Why should he wish to sell?’

‘He’s bent on completing his essay.’

‘To make the reading dull.’

‘There we touch the key of the subject. For what is to rescue the pair from a monotony multiplied by two? And so a bachelor’s recommendation, when each has discovered the right sort of person to be dull with, pushes them from the church-door on a round of adventures containing a spice of peril, if

’tis to be had. Let them be in danger of their lives the first or second day. A bachelor’s loneliness is a private affair of his own; he hasn’t to look into a face to be ashamed of feeling it and inflicting it at the same time; ’tis his pillow; he can punch it an he pleases, and turn it over t’other side, if he’s for a mighty variation; there’s a dream in it. But our poor couple are staring wide awake. All their dreaming’s done. They’ve emptied their bottle of elixir, or broken it; and she has a thirst for the use of the tongue, and he to

yawn with a crony; and they may converse, they're not aware of it, more than the desert that has drunk a shower. So as soon as possible she's away to the ladies, and he puts on his Club. That's what your bachelor sees and would like to spare them; and if he didn't see something of the sort he'd be off with a noose round his neck, on his knees in the dew to the morning milkmaid.'

'The bachelor is happily warned and on his guard,' said Clara, diverted, as he wished her to be. 'Sketch me a few of the adventures you propose.'

'I have a friend who rowed his bride from the Houses of Parliament up the Thames to the Severn on into North Wales. They shot some pretty weirs and rapids.'

'That was nice.'

'They had an infinity of adventures, and the best proof of the benefit they derived is, that they forgot everything about them except that the adventures occurred.'

'Those two must have returned bright enough to please you.'

'They returned, and shone like a wrecker's beacon to the mariner. You see, Miss Middleton, there was the landscape, and the exercise, and the occasional bit of danger. I think it's to be recommended. The scene is always changing, and not too fast; and 'tis not too sublime, like big mountains, to tire them of their everlasting big Ohs. There's the difference between going into a howling wind and launching among zephyrs. They have fresh air and movement, and not in a railway carriage; they can take in what they look on. And she has the steering ropes, and that's a wise commencement. And my lord is all day making an exhibition of his manly strength, bowing before her some sixty to the minute; and she, to help him, just inclines when she's in the mood. And they're face to face in the nature of things, and are not under the obligation of looking the unutterable, because, you see, there's business in hand; and the boat's just the right sort of third party, who never interferes, but must be attended to. And they feel they're labouring together to get along, all in the proper proportion; and whether he has to labour in life or not, he proves his ability. What do you think of it, Miss Middleton?'

'I think you have only to propose it, Colonel De Craye.'

'And if they capsize, why, 'tis a natural ducking!'

'You forgot the lady's dressing-bag.'

'The stain on the metal for a constant reminder of his prowess in saving it! Well, and there's an alternative to that scheme, and a finer: – This, then: they read dramatic pieces during courtship, to stop the saying of things over again till the drum of the ear becomes nothing but a drum to the poor head, and a little before they affix their signatures to the fatal Registry-book of the vestry, they enter into an engagement with a body of provincial actors to join the troop on the day of their nuptials, and away they go in their coach and four, and she is Lady Kitty Caper for a month, and he Sir Harry High-flyer. See the honeymoon spinning! The marvel to me is that none of the young couples do it. They could enjoy the world, see life, amuse the company, and come back fresh to their own characters, instead of giving themselves a dose of Africa without a savage to diversify it: an impression they never get over, I'm told. Many a character of the happiest auspices has irreparable mischief done it by the ordinary honeymoon. For my part, I rather lean to the second plan of campaign.'

Clara was expected to reply, and she said: 'Probably because you are fond of acting. It would require capacity on both sides.'

'Miss Middleton, I would undertake to breathe the enthusiasm for the stage and the adventure.'

'You are recommending it generally.'

'Let my gentleman only have a fund of enthusiasm. The lady will kindle. She always does at a spark.'

'If he has not any?'

'Then I'm afraid they must be mortally dull.'

She allowed her silence to speak; she knew that it did so too eloquently, and could not control the personal adumbration she gave to the one point of light revealed in, 'if he has not any'. Her figure seemed immediately to wear a cap and cloak of dulness.

She was full of revolt and anger, she was burning with her situation; if sensible of shame now at anything that she did, it turned to wrath and threw the burden on the author of her desperate distress. The hour for blaming herself had gone by, to be renewed ultimately perhaps in a season of freedom. She was bereft of her insight within at present, so blind to herself that, while conscious of an accurate reading of Willoughby's friend, she thanked him in her heart for seeking simply to amuse her and slightly succeeding. The afternoon's ride with him and Crossjay was an agreeable beguilement to her in prospect.

Laetitia came to divide her from Colonel De Craye. Dr Middleton was not seen before his appearance at

the breakfast-table, where a certain air of anxiety in his daughter's presence produced the semblance of a raised map at intervals on his forehead. Few sights on earth are more deserving of our sympathy than a good man who has a troubled conscience thrust on him.

The Rev. Doctor's perturbation was observed. The ladies Eleanor and Isabel, seeing his daughter to be the cause of it, blamed her, and would have assisted him to escape, but Miss Dale, whom he courted with that object, was of the opposite faction. She made way for Clara to lead her father out. He called to Vernon, who merely nodded while leaving the room by the window with Crossjay.

Half an eye on Dr Middleton's pathetic exit in captivity sufficed to tell Colonel De Craye that parties divided the house. At first he thought how deplorable it would be to lose Miss Middleton for two days or three: and it struck him that Vernon Whitford and Laetitia Dale were acting oddly in seconding her, their aim not being discernible. For he was of the order of gentlemen of the obscurely-clear in mind who have a predetermined acuteness in their watch upon the human play, and mark men and women as pieces of a bad game of chess, each pursuing an interested course. His experience of a section of the world had educated him – as gallant, frank, and manly a comrade as one could wish for –up to this point. But he soon abandoned speculations, which may be compared to a shaking anemometer that will not let the troubled indicator take station. Reposing on his perceptions and his instincts, he fixed his attention on the chief persons, only glancing at the others to establish a postulate, that where there are parties in a house the most bewitching person present is the origin of them. It is ever Helen's achievement. Miss Middleton appeared to him bewitching beyond mortal; sunny in her laughter, shadowy in her smiling; a young lady shaped for perfect music with a lover.

She was that, and no less, to every man's eye on earth. High breeding did not freeze her lovely girlishness. – But Willoughby did. This reflection intervened to blot luxurious picturings of her, and made itself acceptable by leading him back to several instances of an evident want of harmony of the pair.

And now (for purely undirected impulse all within us is not, though we may be eye-bandaged agents under direction) it became necessary for an honourable gentleman to cast vehement rebukes at the fellow who did not comprehend the jewel he had won. How could Willoughby behave like so complete a donkey! De Craye knew him to be in his interior stiff, strange, exacting: women had talked of him; he had been too much for one woman – the dashing Constantia: he had worn one woman, sacrificing far more for him than Constantia, to death. Still, with such a prize as Clara Middleton, Willoughby's behaviour was past calculating in its contemptible absurdity. And during courtship! And courtship of that girl! It was the way of a man ten years after marriage.

The idea drew him to picture her doatingly in her young matronly bloom ten years after marriage: without a touch of age, matronly wise, womanly sweet: perhaps with a couple of little ones to love, never having known the love of a man.

To think of a girl like Clara Middleton never having at nine-and-twenty, and with two fair children! known the love of a man or the loving of a man, possibly, became torture to the Colonel.

For a pacification he had to reconsider that she was as yet only nineteen and unmarried.

But she was engaged, and she was unloved. One might swear to it, that she was unloved. And she was not a girl to be satisfied with a big house and a high-nosed husband.

There was a rapid alteration of the sad history of Clara the unloved matron solaced by two little ones. A childless Clara tragically loving and beloved flashed across the dark glass of the future.

Either way her fate was cruel.

Some astonishment moved De Craye in the contemplation of the distance he had stepped in this morass of fancy. He distinguished the choice open to him of forward or back, and he selected forward. But fancy was dead: the poetry hovering about her grew invisible to him: he stood in the morass; that was all he knew; and momently he plunged deeper; and he was aware of an intense desire to see her face, that he might study her features again: he understood no more.

It was the clouding of the brain by the man's heart, which had come to the knowledge that it was caught.

A certain measure of astonishment moved him still. It had hitherto been his portion to do mischief to women and avoid the vengeance of the sex. What was there in Miss Middleton's face and air to ensnare a veteran handsome man of society numbering six-and-thirty years, nearly as many conquests? 'Each bullet has got its commission.' He was hit at last. That accident effected by Mr Flitch had fired the shot. Clean through the heart, does not tell us of our misfortune, till the heart is asked to renew its natural beating. It fell into the condition of the porcelain vase over a thought of Miss Middleton standing above his prostrate form on the road, and walking beside him to the Hall. Her words? What have they been? She had not uttered words, she had shed meanings. He did not for an instant conceive that he had charmed her: the

charm she had cast on him was too thrilling for coxcombry to lift a head; still she had enjoyed his prattle. In return for her touch upon the Irish fountain in him, he had manifestly given her relief. And could not one see that so sprightly a girl would soon be deadened by a man like Willoughby? Deadened she was: she had not responded to a compliment on her approaching marriage. An allusion to it killed her smiling. The case of Mr Flitch, with the half wager about his reinstation in the sevice of the Hall, was conclusive evidence of her opinion of Willoughby.

It became again necessary that he should abuse Willoughby for his folly. Why was the man worrying her? In some way he was worrying her.

What if Willoughby as well as Miss Middleton wished to be quit of the engagement?…

For just a second, the handsome, woman-flattered officer proved his man's heart more whole than he supposed it. That great organ, instead of leaping at the thought, suffered a check.

Bear in mind that his heart was not merely man's, it was a conqueror's. He was of the race of amorous heroes who glory in pursuing, overtaking, subduing: wresting the prize from a rival, having her ripe from exquisitely feminine inward conflicts, plucking her out of resistance in good old primitive fashion. You win the creature in her delicious flutterings. He liked her thus, in cooler blood, because of society's admiration of the capturer, and somewhat because of the strife, which always enhances the value of a prize, and refreshes our vanity in recollection.

Moreover, he had been matched against Willoughby: the circumstance had occurred two or three times. He could name a lady he had won, a lady he had lost. Willoughby's large fortune and grandeur of style had given him advantages at the start. But the start often means the race – with women, and a bit of luck.

The gentle check upon the galloping heart of Colonel De Craye endured no longer than a second – a simple side-glance in a headlong pace. Clara's enchantingness for a temperament like his, which is to say, for him specially, in part through the testimony her conquest of himself presented as to her power of sway over the universal heart known as man's, assured him she was worth winning even from a hand that dropped her.

He had now a double reason for exclaiming at the folly of Willoughby. Willoughby's treatment of her showed either temper or weariness. Vanity and judgement led De Craye to guess the former. Regarding her sentiments for Willoughby, he had come to his own conclusion. The certainty of it caused him to assume that he possessed an absolute knowledge of her character: she was an angel, born supple; she was a heavenly soul, with half a dozen of the tricks of earth. Skittish filly was among his phrases; but she had a bearing and a gaze that forbade the dip in the common gutter for wherewithal to paint the creature she was.

Now, then, to see whether he was wrong for the first time in his life! If not wrong, he had a chance.

There could be nothing dishonourable in rescuing a girl from an engagement she detested. An attempt to think it a service to Willoughby failed midway. De Craye dismissed that chicanery. It would be a service to Willoughby in the end, without question. There was that to soothe his manly honour. Meanwhile he had to face the thought of Willoughby as an antagonist, and the world looking heavy on his honour as a friend.

Such considerations drew him tenderly close to Miss Middleton. It must, however, be confessed that the mental ardour of Colonel De Craye had been a little sobered by his glance at the possibility of both of the couple being of one mind on the subject of their betrothal. Desirable as it was that they should be united in disagreeing, it reduced the romance to platitude, and the third person in the drama to the appearance of a stick. No man likes to play that part. Memoirs of the favourites of Goddesses, if we had them, would confirm it of men's tastes in this respect, though the divinest be the prize. We behold what part they played.

De Craye chanced to be crossing the hall from the laboratory to the stables when Clara shut the library-door behind her. He said something whimsical, and did not stop, nor did he look twice at the face he had been longing for.

What he had seen made him fear there would be no ride out with her that day. Their next meeting reassured him; she was dressed in her riding-habit, and wore a countenance resolutely cheerful. He gave himself the word of command to take his tone from her.

He was of a nature as quick as Clara's. Experience pushed him further than she could go in fancy; but experience laid a sobering finger on his practical steps, and bade them hang upon her initiative. She talked little. Young Crossjay cantering ahead was her favourite subject. She was very much changed since the early morning: his liveliness, essayed by him at a hazard, was unsuccessful; grave English pleased her best. The descent from that was naturally to melancholy. She mentioned a regret she had that the Veil was interdicted to women in Protestant countries. De Craye was fortunately silent; he could think of no other veil than the Moslem, and when her meaning struck his witless head, he admitted to himself that devout

attendance on a young lady's mind stupefies man's intelligence. Half an hour later, he was as foolish in supposing it a confidence. He was again saved by silence.

In Aspenwell village she drew a letter from her bosom and called to Crossjay to post it. The boy sung out, 'Miss Lucy Darleton! What a nice name!'

Clara did not show that the name betrayed anything.

She said to De Craye, 'It proves he should not be here thinking of nice names.'

Her companion replied, 'You may be right.' He added, to avoid feeling too subservient: 'Boys will.'

'Not if they have stern masters to teach them their daily lessons, and some of the lessons of existence.'

'Vernon Whitford is not stern enough?'

'Mr Whitford has to contend with other influences here.'

'With Willoughby?'

'Not with Willoughby.'

He understood her. She touched the delicate indication firmly. The man's heart respected her for it; not many girls could be so thoughtful or dare to be so direct; he saw that she had become deeply serious, and he felt her love of the boy to be maternal, past maiden sentiment.

By this light of her seriousness, the posting of her letter in a distant village, not entrusting it to the Hall post-box, might have import; not that she would apprehend the violation of her private correspondence, but we like to see our letter of weighty meaning pass into the mouth of the public box.

Consequently this letter was important. It was to suppose a sequency in the conduct of a variable damsel. Coupled with her remark about the Veil, and with other things, not words, breathing from her (which were the breath of her condition), it was not unreasonably to be supposed. She might even be a very consistent person. If one only had the key of her!

She spoke once of an immediate visit to London, supposing that she could induce her father to go. De Craye remembered the occurrence in the Hall at night, and her aspect of distress.

They raced along Aspenwell Common to the ford; shallow, to the chagrin of young Crossjay, between whom and themselves they left a fitting space for his rapture in leading his pony to splash up and down, lord of the stream.

Swiftness of motion so strikes the blood on the brain that our thoughts are lightnings, the heart is master of them.

De Craye was heated by his gallop to venture on the angling question: 'Am I to hear the names of the bridesmaids?'

The pace had nerved Clara to speak to it sharply: 'There is no need.'

'Have I no claim?'

She was mute.

'Miss Lucy Darleton, for instance; whose name I am almost as much in love with as Crossjay.'

'She will not be bridesmaid to me.'

'She declines? Add my petition, I beg.'

'To all? or to her?'

'Do all the bridesmaids decline?'

'The scene is too ghastly.'

'A marriage?'

'Girls have grown sick of it.'

'Of weddings? We'll overcome the sickness.'

'With some.'

'Not with Miss Darleton? You tempt my eloquence.'

'You wish it?'

'To win her consent? Certainly.'

'The scene?'

'Do I wish that?'

'Marriage!' exclaimed Clara, dashing into the ford, fearful of her ungovernable wildness and of what it might have kindled. – You, father! you have driven me to unmaidenliness! – She forgot Willoughby, in her father, who would not quit a comfortable house for her all but prostiate beseeching; would not bend his mind to her explanations, answered her with the horrid iteration of such deaf misunderstanding as may be

associated with a tolling bell.

De Craye allowed her to catch Crossjay by herself. They entered a narrow lane, mysterious with possible birds' eggs in the May-green hedges. As there was not room for three abreast, the colonel made up the rear-guard, and was consoled by having Miss Middleton's figure to contemplate; but the readiness of her joining in Crossjay's pastime of the nest-hunt was not so pleasing to a man that she had wound to a pitch of excitement. Her scornful accent on 'Marriage' rang through him. Apparently she was beginning to do with him just as she liked, herself entirely unconcerned.

She kept Crossjay beside her till she dismounted, and the colonel was left to the procession of elephantine ideas in his head, whose ponderousness he took for natural weight. We do not with impunity abandon the initiative. Men who have yielded it are like cavalry put on the defensive; a very small force with an ictus will scatter them.

Anxiety to recover lost ground reduced the dimensions of his ideas to a practical standard.

Two ideas were opposed like duellists bent on the slaughter of one another. Either she amazed him by confirming the suspicions he had gathered of her sentiments for Willoughby in the moments of his introduction to her; or she amazed him as a model for coquettes – the married and the widow might apply to her for lessons.

These combatants exchanged shots, but remained standing; the encounter was undecided. Whatever the result, no person so seductive as Clara Middleton had he ever met. Her cry of loathing, 'Marriage!' coming from a girl, rang faintly clear of an ancient virginal aspiration of the sex to escape from their coil, and bespoke a pure, cold, savage pride that transplanted his thirst for her to higher fields.

CHAPTER 23

Treats of the Union of Temper and Policy

SIR WILLOUGHBY meanwhile was on a line of conduct suiting his appreciation of his duty to himself. He had deluded himself with the simple notion that good fruit would come of the union of temper and policy.

No delusion is older, none apparently so promising, both parties being eager for the alliance. Yet the theorist upon human nature will say, they are obviously of adverse disposition. And this is true, inasmuch as neither of them will submit to the yoke of an established union; as soon as they have done their mischief, they set to work tugging for a divorce. But they have attractions, the one for the other, which precipitate them to embrace whenever they meet in a breast; each is earnest with the owner of it to get him to officiate forthwith as wedding-priest. And here is the reason: temper, to warrant its appearance, desires to be thought as deliberative as policy, and policy, the sooner to prove its shrewdness, is impatient for the quick blood of temper.

It will be well for men to resolve at the first approaches of the amorous but fickle pair upon interdicting even an accidental temporary junction: for the astonishing sweetness of the couple when no more than the ghosts of them have come together in a projecting mind is an intoxication beyond fermented grapejuice or a witch's brewage; and under the guise of active wits they will lead us to the parental meditation of antics compared with which a Pagan Saturnalia were less impious in the sight of sanity. This is full-mouthed language; but on our studious way through any human career we are subject to fits of moral elevation; the theme inspires it, and the sage residing in every civilized bosom approves it.

Decide at the outset, that temper is fatal to policy: hold them with both hands in division. One might add, be doubtful of your policy and repress your temper: it would be to suppose you wise. You can, however, by incorporating two or three captains of the great army of truisms bequeathed to us by ancient wisdom, fix in your service those veteran old standfasts to check you. They will not be serviceless in their admonitions to your understanding, and they will so contrive to reconcile with it the natural caperings of the wayward young sprig Conduct, that the latter, who commonly learns to walk upright and straight from nothing softer than raps of a bludgeon on his crown, shall foot soberly, appearing at least wary of dangerous corners.

Now Willoughby had not to be taught that temper is fatal to policy; he was beginning to see in addition that the temper he encouraged was particularly obnoxious to the policy he adopted; and although his purpose in mounting horse after yesterday frowning on his bride was definite, and might be deemed sagacious, he bemoaned already the fatality pushing him ever farther from her in chase of a satisfaction

impossible to grasp.

But the bare fact that her behaviour demanded a line of policy crossed the grain of his temper: it was very offensive.

Considering that she wounded him severely, her reversal of their proper parts, by taking the part belonging to him, and requiring his watchfulness, and the careful dealings he was accustomed to expect from others, and had a right to exact of her, was injuriously unjust. The feelings of a man hereditarily sensitive to property accused her of a trespassing imprudence, and knowing himself, by testimony of his household, his tenants, and the neighbourhood, and the world was well, amiable when he received his dues, he contemplated her with an air of stiff-backed ill-treatment, not devoid of a certain sanctification of martyrdom.

His bitterest enemy would hardly declare that it was he who was in the wrong.

Clara herself had never been audacious enough to say that. Distaste of his person was inconceivable to the favourite of society. The capricious creature probably wanted a whipping to bring her to the understanding of the principle called mastery, which is in man.

But was he administering it? If he retained a hold on her, he could undoubtedly apply the scourge at leisure; any kind of scourge; he could shun her, look on her frigidly, unbend to her to find a warmer place for sarcasm, pityingly smile, ridicule, pay court elsewhere. He could do these things if he retained a hold on her; and he could do them well because of the faith he had in his renowned amiability; for in doing them, he could feel that he was other than he seemed, and his own cordial nature was there to comfort him while he bestowed punishment. Cordial indeed, the chills he endured were flung from the world. His heart was in that fiction: half the hearts now beating have a mild form of it to keep them merry: and the chastisement he desired to inflict was really no more than righteous vengeance for an offended goodness of heart. Clara figuratively, absolutely perhaps, on her knees, he would raise her and forgive her. He yearned for the situation. To let her understand how little she had known him! It would be worth the pain she had dealt, to pour forth the stream of re-established confidences, to paint himself to her as he was; as he was in the spirit, not as he was to the world: though the world had reason to do him honour.

First, however, she would have to be humbled.

Something whispered that his hold on her was lost.

In such a case, every blow he struck would set her flying farther, till the breach between them would be past bridging.

Determination not to let her go was the best finish to this perpetually revolving round which went like the same old wheel-planks of a water mill in his head at a review of the injury he sustained. He had come to it before, and he came to it again. There was his vengeance. It melted him, she was so sweet! She shone for him like the sunny breeze on water. Thinking of her caused a catch of his breath.

The dreadful young woman had a keener edge for the senses of men than sovereign beauty.

It would be madness to let her go.

She affected him like an outlook on the great Patterne estate after an absence, when his welcoming flag wept for pride above Patterne Hall!

It would be treason to let her go.

It would be cruelty to her.

He was bound to reflect that she was of tender age, and the foolishness of the wretch was excusable to extreme youth.

We toss away a flower that we are tired of smelling and do not wish to carry. But the rose – young woman – is not cast off with impunity. A fiend in shape of man is always behind us to appropriate her. He that touches that rejected thing is larcenous. Willoughby had been sensible of it in the person of Laetitia: and by all the more that Clara's charms exceeded the faded creature's, he felt it now. Ten thousand Furies thickened about him at a thought of her lying by the road-side without his having crushed all bloom and odour out of her which might tempt even the curiosity of the fiend, man.

On the other hand, supposing her to lie there untouched, universally declined by the sniffling, sagacious dog-fiend, a miserable spinster for years, he could conceive notions of his remorse. A soft remorse may be adopted as an agreeable sensation within view of the wasted penitent whom we have struck a trifle too hard. Seeing her penitent, he certainly would be willing to surround her with little offices of compromising kindness. It would depend on her age. Supposing her still youngish, there might be captivating passages between them, as thus, in a style not unfamiliar:

'And was it my fault, my poor girl? Am I to blame, that you have passed a lonely, unloved youth?'

‘No, Willoughby! The irreparable error was mine, the blame is mine, mine only. I live to repent it. I do not seek, for I have not deserved, your pardon. Had I it, I should need my own self-esteem to presume to clasp it to a bosom ever unworthy of you.’

‘I may have been impatient, Clara: we are human!’

‘Never be it mine to accuse one on whom I laid so heavy a weight of forbearance!’

‘Still, my old love! – for I am merely quoting history in naming you so – I cannot have been perfectly blameless.’

‘To me you were and are.’

‘Clara!’

‘Willoughby!’

‘Must I recognize the bitter truth that we two, once nearly one! so nearly one! are eternally separated?’

‘I have envisaged it. My friend – I may call you friend; you have ever been my friend, my best friend! Oh, that eyes had been mine to know the friend I had! – Willoughby, in the darkness of night, and during days that were as night to my soul, I have seen the inexorable finger pointing my solitary way through the wilderness from a Paradise forfeited by my most wilful, my wanton, sin. We have met. It is more than I have merited. We part. In mercy let it be for ever. Oh, terrible word! Coined by the passions of our youth, it comes to us for our sole riches when we are bankrupt of earthly treasures, and is the passport given by Abnegation unto Woe that prays to quit this probationary sphere. Willoughby, we part. It is better so.’

‘Clara! one – one only – one last – one holy kiss!’

‘If these poor lips, that once were sweet to you…’

The kiss, to continue the language of the imaginative composition of his time, favourite readings in which had inspired Sir Willoughby with a colloquy so pathetic, was imprinted.

Ay, she had the kiss, and no mean one. It was intended to swallow every vestige of dwindling attractiveness out of her, and there was a bit of scandal springing of it in the background that satisfactorily settled her business, and left her ‘enshrined in memory, a divine recollection to him’, as his popular romances would say, and have said for years.

Unhappily, the fancied salute of her lips encircled him with the breathing Clara. She rushed up from vacancy like a wind summoned to wreck a stately vessel.

His reverie had thrown him into severe commotion. The slave of a passion thinks in a ring, as hares run: he will cease where he began. Her sweetness had set him off, and he whirled back to her sweetness: and that being incalculable and he insatiable, you have the picture of his torments when you consider that her behaviour made her as a cloud to him.

Riding slack, horse and man, in the likeness of those two ajog homeward from the miry hunt, the horse pricked his ears, and Willoughby looked down from his road along the hills on the race headed by young Crossjay with a short start over Aspenwell Common to the ford. There was no mistaking who they were, though they were well-nigh a mile distant below. He noticed that they did not overtake the boy. They drew rein at the ford, talking not simply face to face, but face in face. Willoughby’s novel feeling of he knew not what drew them up to him, enabling him to fancy them bathing in one another’s eyes. Then she sprang through the ford, De Craye following, but not close after – and why not close? She had flicked him with one of her peremptorily saucy speeches when she was bold with the gallop. They were not unknown to Willoughby. They signified intimacy.

Last night he had proposed to De Craye to take Miss Middleton for a ride the next afternoon. It never came to his mind then that he and his friend had formerly been rivals. He wished Clara to be amused. Policy dictated that every thread should be used to attach her to her residence at the Hall until he could command his temper to talk to her calmly and overwhelm her, as any man in earnest, with command of temper and a point of vantage, may be sure to whelm a young woman. Policy, adulterated by temper, yet policy it was that had sent him on his errand in the early morning to beat about for a house and garden suitable to Dr Middleton within a circuit of five, six, or seven miles of Patterne Hall. If the Rev. Doctor liked the house and took it (and Willoughby had seen the place to suit him), the neighbourhood would be a chain upon Clara: and if the house did not please a gentleman rather hard to please (except in a venerable wine), an excuse would have been started for his visiting other houses, and he had that response to his importunate daughter, that he believed an excellent house was on view. Dr Middleton had been prepared by numerous hints to meet Clara’s black misreading of a lovers’ quarrel, so that everything looked full of promise as far as Willoughby’s exercise of policy went.

But the strange pang traversing him now convicted him of a large adulteration of profitless temper with it. The loyalty of De Craye to a friend, where a woman walked in the drama, was notorious. It was there,

and a most flexible thing it was: and it soon resembled reason manipulated by the sophists. Not to have reckoned on his peculiar loyalty was proof of the blindness cast on us by temper.

And De Craye had an Irish tongue; and he had it under control, so that he could talk good sense and airy nonsense at discretion. The strongest overboiling of English Puritan contempt of a gabbler, would not stop women from liking it. Evidently Clara did like it, and Willoughby thundered on her sex. Unto such brainless things as these do we, under the irony of circumstances, confide our honour!

For he was no gabbler. He remembered having rattled in earlier days; he had rattled with an object to gain, desiring to be taken for an easy, careless, vivacious, charming fellow, as any young gentleman may be who gaily wears the golden dish of Fifty thousand pounds per annum nailed to the back of his very saintly young pate. The growth of the critical spirit in him, however, had informed him that slang had been a principal component of his rattling; and as he justly supposed it a betraying art for his race and for him, he passed through the prim and the yawning phases of affected indifference, to the puie Puritanism of a leaden contempt of gabblers.

They snare women, you see – girls! How despicable the host of girls! – at least, that girl below there!

Married women understood him: widows did. He placed an exceedingly handsome and flattering young widow of his acquaintance, Lady Mary Lewison, beside Clara for a comparison, involuntarily; and at once, in a flash, in despite of him (he would rather it had been otherwise), and in despite of Lady Mary's high birth and connections as well, the silver lustre of the maid sicklied the poor widow.

The effect of the luckless comparison was to produce an image of surpassingness in the features of Clara that gave him the final, or mace-blow. Jealousy invaded him.

He had hitherto been free of it, regarding jealousy as a foreign devil, the accursed familiar of the vulgar. Luckless fellows might be victims of the disease; he was not; and neither Captain Oxford, nor Vernon, nor De Craye, nor any of his compeers, had given him one shrewd pinch: the woman had, not the man; and she in quite a different fashion from his present wallowing anguish: she had never pulled him to earth's level, where jealousy gnaws the grasses. He had boasted himself above the humiliating visitation.

If that had been the case, we should not have needed to trouble ourselves much about him. A run or two with the pack of imps would have satisfied us. But he desired Clara Middleton manfully enough, at an intimation of rivalry to be jealous; in a minute the foreign devil had him, he was flame: flaming verdigris, one might almost dare to say, for an exact illustration; such was actually the colour; but accept it as unsaid.

Remember the poets upon jealousy. It is to be haunted in the heaven of two by a Third; preceded or succeeded, therefore surrounded, embraced, hugged by this infernal Third: it is Love's bed of burning marl; to see and taste the withering Third in the bosom of sweetness; to be dragged through the past and find the fair Eden of it sulphurous; to be dragged to the gates of the future and glory to behold them blood: to adore the bitter creature trebly and with treble power to clutch her by the windpipe: it is to be cheated, derided, shamed, and abject and supplicating, and consciously demoniacal in treacherousness, and victoriously self-justified in revenge.

And still there is no change in what men feel, though in what they do the modern may be judicious.

You know the many paintings of man transformed to rageing beast by the curse: and this, the fieriest trial of our egoism, worked in the Egoist to produce division of himself from himself, a concentration of his thoughts upon another object, still himself, but in another breast, which had to be looked at and into for the discovery of him. By the gaping jaw-chasm of his greed we may gather comprehension of his insatiate force of jealousy. Let her go? Not though he were to become a mark of public scorn in strangling her with the yoke! His concentration was marvellous. Unused to the exercise of imaginative powers, he nevertheless conjured her before him visually till his eyeballs ached. He saw none but Clara, hated none, loved none, save the intolerable woman. What logic was in him deduced her to be individual and most distinctive from the circumstance that only she had ever wrought these pangs. She had made him ready for them, as we know. An idea of De Craye being no stranger to her when he arrived at the Hall, dashed him at De Craye for a second: it might be or might not be that they had a secret; – Clara was the spell. So prodigiously did he love and hate, that he had no permanent sense except for her. The soul of him writhed under her eyes at one moment, and the next it closed on her without mercy. She was his possession escaping; his own gliding away to the Third.

There would be pangs for him too, that Third! Standing at the altar to see her fast-bound, soul and body, to another, would be good roasting fire.

It would be good roasting fire for her too, should she be averse. To conceive her aversion was to burn her and devour her. She would then be his! – what say you? Burned and devoured! Rivals would vanish then. Her reluctance to espouse the man she was plighted to would cease to be uttered, cease to be felt.

At last he believed in her reluctance. All that had been wanted to bring him to the belief was the scene on the common; such a mere spark, or an imagined spark! But the presence of the Third was necessary; otherwise he would have had to suppose himself personally distasteful.

Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man, or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. But it is as we please. Let them tell us what we are to them: for us, they are our back and front of life: the poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice; ours is the choice. And were it proved that some of the bright things are in the pay of Darkness, with the stamp of his coin on their palms, and that some are the very angels we hear sung of, not the less might we say that they find us out; they have us by our leanings. They are to us what we hold of best or worst within. By their state is our civilization judged: and if it is hugely animal still, that is because primitive men abound and will have their pasture. Since the lead is ours, the leaders must bow their heads to the sentence. Jealousy of a woman is the primitive egoism seeking to refine in a blood gone to savagery under apprehension of an invasion of rights; it is in action the tiger threatened by a rifle when his paw is rigid on quick flesh; he tears the flesh for rage at the intruder. The Egoist, who is our original male in giant form, had no bleeding victim beneath his paw, but there was the sex to mangle. Much as he prefers the well-behaved among women, who can worship and fawn, and in whom terror can be inspired, in his wrath he would make of Beatrice a Lesbia Quadrantaria.[23]

Let women tell us of their side of the battle. We are not so much the test of the Egoist in them as they to us. Movements of similarity shown in crowned and undiademed ladies of intrepid independence, suggest their occasional capacity to be like men when it is given to them to hunt. At present they fly, and there is the difference. Our manner of the chase informs them of the creature we are.

Dimly as young women are informed, they have a youthful ardour of detestation that renders them less tolerant of the Egoist than their perceptive elder sisters. What they do perceive, however, they have a redoubtable grasp of, and Clara's behaviour would be indefensible if her detective feminine vision might not sanction her acting on its direction. Seeing him as she did, she turned from him and shunned his house as the antre of an ogre. She had posted her letter to Lucy Darleton. Otherwise, if it had been open to her to dismiss Colonel De Craye, she might, with a warm kiss to Vernon's pupil, have seriously thought of the next shrill steam-whistle across yonder hills for a travelling companion on the way to her friend Lucy; so abhorrent was to her the putting of her horse's head toward the Hall. Oh, the breaking of bread there! It had to be gone through for another day and more; that is to say, forty hours, it might be six-and-forty hours; and no prospect of sleep to speed any of them on wings!

Such were Clara's inward interjections while poor Willoughby burned himself out with verdigris flame having the savour of bad metal, till the hollow of his breast was not unlike to a corroded old cuirass, found, we will assume, by criminal lantern-beams in a digging beside green-mantled pools of the sullen soil, lumped with a strange adhesive concrete. How else picture the sad man? – the cavity felt empty to him, and heavy; sick of an ancient and mortal combat, and burning; deeply dinted too:

> With the starry hole
> Whence fled the soul:

very sore; important for aught save sluggish agony; a specimen and the issue of strife.

Measurelessly to loathe was not sufficient to save him from pain: he tried it: nor to despise; he went to a depth there also. The fact that she was a healthy young woman returned to the surface of his thoughts like the murdered body pitched into the river, which will not drown, and calls upon the elements of dissolution to float it. His grand hereditary desire to transmit his estates, wealth and name to a solid posterity, while it prompted him in his loathing and contempt of a nature mean and ephemeral compared with his, attached him desperately to her splendid healthiness. The council of elders, whose descendant he was, pointed to this young woman for his mate. He had wooed her with the idea that they consented. O she was healthy! And he likewise: but, as if it had been a duel between two clearly designated by quality of blood to bid a House endure, she was the first who taught him what it was to have sensations of his mortality.

He could not forgive her. It seemed to him consequently politic to continue frigid and let her have a further taste of his shadow, when it was his burning wish to strain her in his arms to a flatness provoking his compassion.

'You have had your ride?' he addressed her politely in the general assembly on the lawn.

'I have had my ride, yes,' Clara replied.

'Agreeable, I trust?'

'Very agreeable.'

So it appeared. Oh, blushless!

The next instant he was in conversation with Laetitia, questioning her upon a dejected droop of her eyelashes.

‘I am, I think,’ said she, ‘constitutionally melancholy.’

He murmured to her: ‘I believe in the existence of specifics, and not far to seek, for all our ailments except those we bear at the hands of others.’

She did not dissent.

De Craye, whose humour for being convinced that Willoughby cared about as little for Miss Middleton as she for him was nourished by his immediate observation of them, dilated on the beauty of the ride and his fair companion’s equestrian skill.

‘You should start a travelling circus,’ Willoughby rejoined.

‘But the idea’s a worthy one! – There’s another alternative to the expedition I proposed, Miss Middleton,’ said De Craye. ‘And I be clown? I haven’t a scruple of objection. I must read up books of jokes.’

‘Don’t,’ said Willoughby.

‘I’d spoil my part! But a natural clown won’t keep up an artificial performance for an entire month, you see; which is the length of time we propose. He’ll exhaust his nature in a day and be bowled over by the dullest regular donkey-engine with paint on his cheeks and a nodding topknot.’

‘What is this expedition “we” propose?’

De Craye was advised in his heart to spare Miss Middleton any allusion to honeymoons.

‘Merely a game to cure dulness.’

‘Ah!’ Willoughby acquiesced. ‘A month, you said?’

‘One’d like it to last for years.’

‘Ah! You are driving one of Mr Merriman’s witticisms at me, Horace; I am dense.’

Willoughby bowed to Dr Middleton, and drew him from Vernon, filially taking his turn to talk with him closely.

De Craye saw Clara’s look as her father and Willoughby went aside thus linked.

It lifted him over anxieties and casuistries concerning loyalty. Powder was in the look to make a warhorse breathe high and shiver for the signal.

CHAPTER 24

Contains an Instance of the Generosity of Willoughby

OBSERVERS of a gathering complication and a character in action commonly resemble gleaners who are intent only on picking up the ears of grain and huddling their store. Disinterestedly or interestedly they wax over-eager for the little trifles, and make too much of them. Observers should begin upon the precept that not all we see is worth hoarding, and that the things we see are to be weighed in the scale with what we know of the situation, before we commit ourselves to a measurement. And they may be accurate observers without being good judges. They do not think so, and their bent is to glean hurriedly and form conclusions as hasty, when their business should be sift at each step, and question.

Miss Dale seconded Vernon Whitford in the occupation of counting looks and tones, and noting scraps of dialogue. She was quite disinterested; he quite believed that he was; to this degree they were competent for their post; and neither of them imagined they could be personally involved in the dubious result of the scenes they witnessed. They were but anxious observers, diligently collecting. She fancied Clara susceptible to his advice: he had fancied it, and was considering it one of his vanities. Each mentally compared Clara’s abruptness in taking them into her confidence with her abstention from any secret word since the arrival of Colonel De Craye. Sir Willoughby requested Laetitia to give Miss Middleton as much of her company as she could; showing that he was on the alert. Another Constantia Durham seemed beating her wings for flight. The suddenness of the evident intimacy between Clara and Colonel De Craye shocked Laetitia; their acquaintance could be computed by hours. Yet

at their first interview she had suspected the possibility of worse than she now supposed to be; and she

had begged Vernon not immediately to quit the Hall, in consequence of that faint suspicion. She had been led to it by meeting Clara and De Craye at her cottage-gate, and finding them as fluent and laughter-breathing in conversation as friends. Unable to realize the rapid advance to a familiarity, more ostensible than actual, of two lively natures, after such an introduction as they had undergone: and one of the two pining in a drought of liveliness: Laetitia listened to their wager of nothing at all – a *no* against a *yes* – in the case of poor Flitch; and Clara's, 'Willoughby will not forgive'; and De Craye's 'Oh, he's human': and the silence of Clara and De Craye's hearty cry, 'Flitch shall be a gentleman's coachman in his old seat again, or I haven't a tongue!' to which there was a negative of Clara's head: and it then struck Laetitia that this young betrothed

lady, whose alienated heart acknowledged no lord an hour earlier, had met her match, and, as the observer would have said, her destiny. She judged of the alarming possibility by the recent revelation to herself of Miss Middleton's character, and by Clara's having spoken to a man as well (to Vernon), and previously. That a young lady should speak on the subject of the inner holies to a man, though he were Vernon Whitford, was incredible to Laetitia; but it had to be accepted as one of the dread facts of our inexplicable life, which drag our bodies at their wheels and leave our minds exclaiming. Then, if Clara could speak to Vernon, which Laetitia would not have done for a mighty bribe, she could speak to De Craye, Laetitia thought deductively: this being the logic of untrained heads opposed to the proceeding whereby their condemnatory deduction hangs. – Clara must have spoken to De Craye!

Laetitia remembered how winning and prevailing Miss Middleton could be in her confidences. A gentleman hearing her might forget his duty to his friend, she thought, for she had been strangely swayed by Clara: ideas of Sir Willoughby that she had never before imagined herself to entertain had been sown in her, she thought; not asking herself whether the searchingness of the young lady had struck them and bidden them rise from where they lay imbedded. Very gentle women take in that manner impressions of persons, especially of the worshipped person, wounding them; like the new fortifications with embankments of soft earth, where explosive missiles bury themselves harmlessly until they are plucked out; and it may be a reason why those injured ladies outlive a Clara Middleton similarly battered.

Vernon less than Laetitia took into account that Clara was in a state of fever, scarcely reasonable. Her confidences to him he had excused, as a piece of conduct, in sympathy with her position. He had not been greatly astonished by the circumstances confided; and, on the whole, as she was excited and unhappy, he excused her thoroughly; he could have extolled her: it was natural that she should come to him, brave in her to speak so frankly, a compliment that she should condescend to treat him as a friend. Her position excused her widely. But she was not excused for making a confidential friend of De Craye. There was a difference.

Well, the difference was, that De Craye had not the smarting sense of honour with women which our meditator had: an impartial judiciary, it will be seen: and he discriminated between himself and the other justly: but sensation surging to his brain at the same instant, he reproached Miss Middleton for not perceiving that difference as clearly, before she betrayed her position to De Craye, which Vernon assumed that she had done. Of course he did. She had been guilty of it once: why, then, in the mind of an offended friend, she would be guilty of it twice. There was evidence. Ladies, fatally predestined to appeal to that from which they have to be guarded, must expect severity when they run off their railed highroad: justice is out of the question: man's brains might, his blood cannot administer it to them. By chilling him to the bone they may get what they cry for. But that is a method deadening to their point of appeal.

In the evening, Miss Middleton and the colonel sang a duet. She had of late declined to sing. Her voice was noticeably firm. Sir Willoughby said to her, 'You have recovered your richness of tone, Clara.' She smiled and appeared happy in pleasing him. He named a French ballad. She went to the music-rack and gave the song unasked. He should have been satisfied, for she said to him at the finish, 'Is that as you like it?' He broke from a murmur to Miss Dale, 'Admirable.' Some one mentioned a Tuscan popular canzone. She waited for Willoughby's approval, and took his nod for a mandate.

Traitress! he could have bellowed.

He had read of this characteristic of caressing obedience of the women about to deceive. He had in his time profited by it.

'Is it intuitively or by their experience that our neighbours across Channel surpass us in the knowledge of your sex?' he said to Miss Dale, and talked through Clara's apostrophe to the "Santissima Virgine Maria", still treating temper as a part of policy, without any effect on Clara; and that was matter for sickly green reflections. The lover who cannot wound has indeed lost anchorage; he is woefully adrift: he stabs air, which is to stab himself. Her complacent proof-armour bids him know himself supplanted.

During the short conversational period before the ladies retired for the night, Miss Eleanor alluded to the

wedding by chance. Miss Isabel replied to her, and addressed an interrogation to Clara. De Craye foiled it adroitly. Clara did not utter a syllable. Her bosom lifted to a wavering height and sank. Subsequently she looked at De Craye vacantly, like a person awakened, but she looked. She was astonished by his readiness, and thankful for the succour. Her look was cold, wide, unfixed, with nothing of gratitude or of personal in it. The look, however, stood too long for Willoughby's endurance. Ejaculating 'Porcelain!' he uncrossed his legs; a signal for the ladies Eleanor and Isabel to retire. Vernon bowed to Clara as she was rising. He had not been once in her eyes, and he expected a partial recognition at the good-night. She said, it turning her head to Miss Isabel, who was condoling once more with Colonel De Craye over the ruins of his wedding-present, the porcelain vase, which she supposed to have been in Willoughby's mind when he displayed the signal. Vernon walked off to his room, dark as one smitten blind: bile tumet jecur:[24] her stroke of neglect hit him there where a blow sends thick obscuration upon eyeballs and brain alike.

Clara saw that she was paining him and regretted it when they were separated. That was her real friend! But he prescribed too hard a task. Besides, she had done everything he demanded of her, except the consenting to stay where she was and wear out Willoughby, whose dexterity wearied her small stock of patience. She had vainly tried remonstrance and supplication with her father hoodwinked by his host, she refused to consider how; through wine? – the thought was repulsive.

Nevertheless, she was drawn to the edge of it by the contemplation of her scheme of release. If Lucy Darleton was at home; if Lucy invited her to come: if she flew to Lucy: oh! then her father would have cause for anger. He would not remember that but for hateful wine!…

What was there in this wine of great age which expelled reasonableness, fatherliness? He was her dear father: she was his beloved child: yet something divided them; something closed her father's ears to her: and could it be that incomprehensible seduction of the wine? Her dutifulness cried violently no. She bowed, stupefied, to his arguments for remaining awhile, and rose clear-headed and rebellious with the reminiscence of the many strong reasons she had urged against them.

The strangeness of men, young and old, the little things (she regarded a grand wine as a little thing) twisting and changing them, amazed her. And these are they by whom women are abused for variability! Only the most imperious reasons, never mean trifles, move women, thought she. Would women do an injury to one they loved for oceans of that – ah, pah!

And women must respect men. They necessarily respect a father. 'My dear, dear father!' Clara said in the solitude of her chamber, musing on all his goodness, and she endeavoured to reconcile the desperate sentiments of the position he forced her to sustain, with those of a venerating daughter. The blow which was to fall on him beat on her heavily in advance. 'I have not one excuse!' she said, glancing at numbers and a mighty one. But the idea of her father suffering at her hands cast her down lower than self-justification. She sought to imagine herself sparing him. It was too fictitious.

The sanctuary of her chamber, the pure white room so homely to her maidenly feelings, whispered peace, only to follow the whisper with another that went through her swelling to a roar, and leaving her as a string of music unkindly smitten. If she stayed in this house her chamber would no longer be a sanctuary. Dolorous bondage! Insolent death is not worse. Death's worm we cannot keep away, but when he has us we are numb to dishonour, happily senseless.

Youth weighed her eyelids to sleep, though she was quivering, and quivering she awoke to the sound of her name beneath her window. 'I can love still, for I love him,' she said, as she luxuriated in young Crossjay's boy's voice, again envying him his bath in the lake waters, which seemed to her to have the power to wash away grief and chains. Then it was that she resolved to let Crossjay see the last of her in this place. He should be made gleeful by doing her a piece of service; he should escort her on her walk to the railway station next morning, thence be sent flying for a long day's truancy, with a little note of apology on his behalf that she would write for him to deliver to Vernon at night.

Crossjay came running to her after his breakfast with Mrs Montague, the housekeeper, to tell her he had called her up.

'You won't to-morrow: I shall be up far ahead of you,' said she; and musing on her father, while Crossjay vowed to be up the first, she thought it her duty to plunge into another expostulation.

Willoughby had need of Vernon on private affairs. Dr Middleton betook himself as usual to the library, after answering 'I will ruin you yet,' to Willoughby's liberal offer to despatch an order to London for any books he might want.

His fine unruffled air, as of a mountain in still morning beams, made Clara not indisposed to a preliminary scene with Willoughby that might save her from distressing him, but she could not stop Willoughby; as little could she look an invitation. He stood in the Hall, holding Vernon by the arm. She passed him; he did not speak, and she entered the library.

‘What now, my dear? what is it?’ said Dr Middleton, seeing that the door was shut on them.

‘Nothing, papa,’ she replied, calmly.

‘You’ve not locked the door, my child? You turned something there: try the handle.’

‘I assure you, papa, the door is not locked.’

‘Mr Whitford will be here instantly. We are engaged on tough matter. Women have not, and opinion is universal that they never will have, a conception of the value of time.’

‘We are vain and shallow, my dear papa.’

‘No, no, not you, Clara. But I suspect you to require to learn by having work in progress how important is… is a quiet commencement of the day’s task. There is not a scholar who will not tell you so. We must have a retreat. These invasions! – So you intend to have another ride to-day? They do you good. To-morrow we dine with Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, an estimable person indeed, though I do not perfectly understand our accepting. – You have not to accuse me of sitting over wine last night, my Clara! I never do it, unless I am appealed to for my judgement upon a wine.’

‘I have come to entreat you to take me away, papa.’

In the midst of the storm aroused by this renewal of perplexity, Dr Middleton replaced a book his elbow had knocked over in his haste to dash the hair off his forehead, crying: ‘Whither? To what spot? That reading of guide-books, and idle people’s notes of Travel, and picturesque correspondence in the newspapers, unsettles man and maid. My objection to the living in hotels is known. I do not hesitate to say that I do cordially abhor it. I have had penitentially to submit to it in your dear mother’s time, και τρισκακοδαίμων[25] up to the full ten thousand times. But will you not comprehend that to the older man his miseries are multiplied by his years? But is it utterly useless to solicit your sympathy with an old man, Clara?’

‘General Darleton will take us in, papa.’

‘His table is detestable. I say nothing of that; but his wine is poison. Let that pass – I should rather say, let it not pass! – but our political views are not in accord. True, we are not under the obligation to propound them in presence, but we are destitute of an opinion in common. We have no discourse. Military men *have* produced, or diverged in, noteworthy epicures; they are often devout; they have blossomed in lettered men: they are gentlemen; the country rightly holds them in honour; but, in fine, I reject the proposal to go to General Darleton – Tears?’

‘No, papa.’

‘I do hope not. Here we have everything man can desire; without contest, an excellent host. You have your transitory tea-cup tempests, which you magnify to hurricanes, in the approved historic manner of the book of Cupid. And all the better; I repeat, it is the better that you should have them over in the infancy of the alliance. Come in!’ Dr Middleton shouted cheerily in response to a knock at the door.

He feared the door was locked: he had a fear that his daughter intended to keep it locked.

‘Clara!’ he cried.

She reluctantly turned the handle, and the ladies Eleanor and Isabel came in, apologizing with as much coherence as Dr Middleton ever expected from their sex. They wished to speak to Clara, but they declined to take her away. In vain the Rev. Doctor assured them she was at their service; they protested that they had very few words to say, and would not intrude one moment further than to speak them.

Like a shy deputation of young scholars before the master, these very words to come were preceded by none at all; a dismal and trying cause; refreshing however to Dr Middleton, who joyfully anticipated that the ladies could be induced to take away Clara when they had finished.

‘We may appear to you a little formal,’ Miss Isabel began, and turned to her sister.

‘We have no intention to lay undue weight on our mission, if mission it can be called,’ said Miss Eleanor.

‘Is it intrusted to you by Willoughby?’ said Clara.

‘Dear child, that you may know it all the more earnest with us, and our personal desire to contribute to your happiness: therefore does Willoughby intrust the speaking of it to us.’

Hereupon the sisters alternated in addressing Clara, and she gazed from one to the other, piecing fragments of empty signification to get the full meaning when she might.

‘– And in saying, your happiness, dear Clara, we have our Willoughby’s in view, which is dependent on yours.’

‘– And we never could sanction that our own inclinations should stand in the way.’

‘– No. We love the old place; and if it were only our punishment for loving it too idolatrously, we should deem it ground enough for our departure.’

‘– Without, really, an idea of unkindness; none, not any.’

‘– Young wives naturally prefer to be undisputed queens of their own establishment.’

‘– Youth and age!’

‘But I,’ said Clara, ‘have never mentioned, never had a thought…’

‘– You have, dear child, a lover who in his solicitude for your happiness both sees what you desire and what is due to you.’

‘– And for us, Clara, to recognize what is due to you is to act on it.’

‘– Besides, dear, a sea-side cottage has always been one of our dreams.’

‘– We have not to learn that we are a couple of old maids, incongruous associates for a young wife in the government of a great house.’

‘– With our antiquated notions, questions of domestic management might arise, and with the best will in the world to be harmonious!’

‘– So, dear Clara, consider it settled.’

‘– From time to time gladly shall we be your guests.’

‘– Your guests, dear, not censorious critics.’

‘And you think me such an Egoist! – dear ladies! The suggestion of so cruel a piece of selfishness wounds me. I would not have had you leave the Hall. I like your society; I respect you. My complaint, if I had one, would be, that you do not sufficiently assert yourselves. I could have wished you to be here for an example to me. I would not have allowed you to go. What can he think of me! Did Willoughby speak of it this morning?’

It was hard to distinguish which was the completer dupe of these two echoes of one another in worship of a family idol.

‘Willoughby,’ Miss Eleanor presented herself to be stamped with the title hanging ready for the first that should open her lips, ‘our Willoughby is observant – he is ever generous – and he is not less forethoughtful. His arrangement is for our good on all sides.’

‘An index is enough,’ said Miss Isabel, appearing in her turn the monster dupe.

‘You will not have to leave, dear ladies. Were I mistress here I should oppose it.’

‘Willoughby blames himself for not reassuring you before.’

‘Indeed we blame ourselves for not undertaking to go.’

‘Did he speak of it first this morning?’ said Clara; but she could draw no reply to that from them. They resumed the duet, and she resigned herself to have her ears boxed with nonsense.

‘So, it is understood?’ said Miss Eleanor.

‘I see your kindness, ladies.’

‘And I am to be Aunt Eleanor again?’

‘And I Aunt Isabel?’

Clara could have wrung her hands at the impediment which prohibited her delicacy from telling them why she could not name them so as she had done in the earlier days of Willoughby’s courtship. She kissed them warmly, ashamed of kissing, though the warmth was real.

They retired with a flow of excuses to Dr Middleton for disturbing him. He stood at the door to bow them out, and holding the door for Clara to wind up the procession, discovered her at a far corner of the room.

He was debating upon the advisability of leaving her there, when Vernon Whitford crossed the hall from the laboratory door, a mirror of himself in his companion air of discomposure.

That was not important, so long as Vernon was a check on Clara, but the moment Clara, thus baffled, moved to quit the library, Dr Middleton felt the horror of having an uncomfortable face opposite.

‘No botheration, I hope? It’s the worst thing possible to work on. Where have you been? I suspect your weak point is not to arm yourself in triple brass against bother and worry, and no good work can you do unless you do. You have come out of that laboratory.’

‘I have, sir. – Can I get you any book?’ Vernon said to Clara.

She thanked him, promising to depart immediately.

‘Now you are at the section of Italian literature, my love,’ said Dr Middleton. ‘Well, Mr Whitford, the laboratory – ah! – where the amount of labour done within the space of a year would not stretch an electric current between this Hall and the railway station: say, four miles, which I presume the distance to be. Well, sir, and a dilettantism costly in time and machinery is as ornamental as foxes’ tails and deer’s horns to an independent gentleman whose fellows are contented with the latter decorations for their civic wreath.

Willoughby, let me remark, has recently shown himself most considerate for my girl. As far as I could gather – I have been listening to a dialogue of ladies – he is as generous as he is discreet. There arc certain combats in which to be the one to succumb is to claim the honours; – and that is what women will not learn. I doubt their seeing the glory of it.'

'I have heard of it; I have been with Willoughby,' Vernon said, hastily, to shield Clara from her father's allusive attacks. He wished to convey to her that his interview with Willoughby had not been profitable in her interests, and that she had better at once, having him present to support her, pour out her whole heart to her father. But how was it to be conveyed? She would not meet his eyes, and he was too poor an intriguer to be ready on the instant to deal out the verbal obscurities which are transparencies to one.

'I shall regret it, if Willoughby has annoyed you, for he stands high in my favour,' said Dr Middleton.

Clara dropped a book. Her father started higher than the nervous impulse warranted in his chair. Vernon tried to win a glance, and she was conscious of his effort, but her angry and guilty feelings, prompting her resolution to follow her own counsel, kept her eyelids on the defensive.

'I don't say he annoys me, sir. I am here to give him my advice, and if he does not accept it I have no right to be annoyed. Willoughby seems annoyed that Colonel De Craye should talk of going to-morrow or next day.'

'He likes his friends about him. Upon my word, a man of a more genial heart you might march a day without finding. But you have it on the forehead, Mr Whitford.'

'Oh, no, sir.'

'There,' Dr Middleton drew his finger along his brows.

Vernon felt along his own, and coined an excuse for their blackness; not aware that the direction of his mind toward Clara pushed him to a kind of clumsy double meaning, while he satisfied an inward and craving wrath, as he said: 'By the way, I have been racking my head; I must apply to you, sir. I have a line, and I am uncertain of the run of the line. Will this pass, do you think?

' "In Asination's tongue he asinates";

signifying that he excels any man of us at donkey-dialect.'

After a decent interval for the genius of criticism to seem to have been sitting under his frown, Dr Middleton rejoined with sober jocularity: 'No, sir, it will not pass; and your uncertainty in regard to the run of the line would only be extended were the line centipedal. Our recommendation is, that you erase it before the arrival of the ferule. This might do:

' "In Assignation's name he assignats";

signifying that he pre-eminently flourishes hypothetical promises to pay by appointment. That might pass. But you will forbear to cite me for your authority.'

'The line would be acceptable if I could get it to apply,' said Vernon.

'Or this…' Dr Middleton was offering a second suggestion, but Clara fled, astonished at men as she never yet had been. Why, in a burning world they would be exercising their minds in absurdities! And those two were scholars, learned men! And both knew they were in the presence of a soul in a tragic fever!

A minute after she had closed the door they were deep in their work. Dr Middleton forgot his alternative line.

'Nothing serious?' he said in reproof of the want of honourable clearness on Vernon's brows.

'I trust not, sir; it's a case for common sense.'

'And you call that not serious?'

'I take Hermann's praise of the versus dochmiachus to be not only serious but unexaggerated,' said Vernon.

Dr Middleton assented and entered on the voiceful ground of Greek metres, shoving your dry dusty world from his elbows.

CHAPTER 25

The Flight in Wild Weather

THE morning of Lucy Darleton's letter of reply to her friend Clara was fair before sunrise, with luminous colours that are an omen to the husbandman. Clara had no weather-eye for the rich Eastern crimson, nor a quiet space within her for the beauty. She looked on it as her gate of promise, and it set her throbbing with a revived belief in radiant things which she had once dreamed of to surround her life, but her accelerated pulses narrowed her thoughts upon the machinery of her project. She herself was metal, pointing all to her one aim when in motion. Nothing came amiss to it, everything was fuel; fibs, evasions, the serene battalions of white lies parallel on the march with dainty rogue falsehoods. She had delivered herself of many yesterday in her engagements for to-day. Pressure was put on her to engage herself, and she did so liberally, throwing the burden of deceitfulness on the extraordinary pressure. 'I want the early part of the morning; the rest of the day I shall be at liberty.' She said it to Willoughby, Miss Dale, Colonel De Craye, and only the third time was she aware of the delicious double meaning. Hence she associated it with the colonel.

Your loudest outcry against the wretch who breaks your rules is in asking how a tolerably conscientious person could have done this and the other besides the main offence, which you vow you could overlook but for the minor objections pertaining to conscience, the incomprehensible and abominable lies, for example, or the brazen coolness of the lying. Yet you know that we live in an undisciplined world, where in our seasons of activity we are servants of our design, and that this comes of our passions, and those of our position. Our design shapes us for the work in hand, the passions man the ship, the position is their apology: and now should conscience be a passenger on board, a merely seeming swiftness of our vessel will keep him dumb as the unwilling guest of a pirate captain scudding from the cruiser half in cloven brine through rocks and shoals to save his black flag. Beware the false position.

That is easy to say: sometimes the tangle descends on us like a net of blight on a rose-bush. There is then an instant choice for us between courage to cut loose, and desperation if we do not. But not many men are trained to courage; young women are trained to cowardice. For them to front an evil with plain speech is to be guilty of effrontery and forfeit the waxen polish of purity, and therewith their commanding place in the market. They are trained to please man's taste, for which purpose they soon learn to live out of themselves, and look on themselves as he looks, almost as little disturbed as he by the undiscovered. Without courage, conscience is a sorry guest; and if all goes well with the pirate captain, conscience will be made to walk the plank for being of no service to either party.

Clara's fibs and evasions disturbed her not in the least that morning. She had chosen desperation, and she thought herself very brave because she was just brave enough to fly from her abhorrence. She was light-hearted, or, more truly, drunken-hearted. Her quick nature realized the out of prison as vividly and suddenly as it had sunk suddenly and leadenly under the sense of imprisonment. Vernon crossed her mind: that was a friend! Yes, and there was a guide; but he would disapprove, and even he, thwarting her way to sacred liberty, must be thrust aside.

What would he think? They might never meet, for her to know. Or one day in the Alps they might meet, a middle-aged couple, he famous, she regretful only to have fallen below his lofty standard. 'For, Mr Whitford,' says she, very earnestly, 'I did wish at that time, believe me or not, to merit your approbation.' The brows of the phantom Vernon whom she conjured up were stern, as she had seen them yesterday in the library.

She gave herself a chiding for thinking of him when her mind should be intent on that which he was opposed to.

It was a livelier relaxation to think of young Crossjay's shame-faced confession presently, that he had been a laggard in bed while she swept the dews. She laughed at him, and immediately Crossjay popped out on her from behind a tree, causing her to clap hand to heart and stand fast. A conspirator is not of the stuff to bear surprises. He feared he had hurt her, and was manly in his efforts to soothe: he had been up 'hours', he said, and had watched her coming along the avenue, and did not mean to startle her: it was the kind of fun he played with fellows, and if he had hurt her, she might do anything to him she liked, and she would see if he could not stand to be punished. He was urgent with her to inflict corporal punishment on him.

'I shall leave it to the boatswain to do that when you're in the navy,' said Clara.

'The boatswain daren't strike an officer! so now you see what you know of the navy,' said Crossjay.

'But you could not have been out before me, you naughty boy, for I found all the locks and bolts when I went to the door.'

'But you didn't go to the back door, and Sir Willoughby's private door: you came out by the hall door; and I know what you want, Miss Middleton, you want not to pay what you've lost.'

‘What have I lost, Crossjay?’

‘Your wager.’

‘What was that?’

‘You know.’

‘Speak.’

‘A kiss.’

‘Nothing of the sort. But, dear boy, I don’t love you less for not kissing you. All that is nonsense: you have to think only of learning, and to be truthful. Never tell a story: suffer anything rather than be dishonest.’ She was particularly impressive upon the silliness and wickedness of falsehood, and added: ‘Do you hear?’

‘Yes: but you kissed me when I had been out in the rain that day.’

‘Because I promised.’

‘And, Miss Middleton, you betted a kiss yesterday.’

‘I am sure, Crossjay – no, I will not say I am sure: but can you say you are sure you were out first this morning? Well, will you say you are sure that when you left the house you did not see me in the avenue? You can’t: ah!’

‘Miss Middleton, I do really believe I was dressed first.’

‘Always be truthful, my dear boy, and then you may feel that Clara Middleton will always love you.’

‘But, Miss Middleton, when you’re married you won’t be Clara Middleton.’

‘I certainly shall, Crossjay.’

‘No, you won’t, because I’m so fond of your name!’

She considered, and said: ‘You have warned me, Crossjay, and I shall not marry. I shall wait,’ she was going to say, ‘for you,’ but turned the hesitation to a period. ‘Is the village where I posted my letter the day before yesterday too far for you?’

Crossjay howled in contempt. ‘Next to Clara, my favourite’s Lucy,’ he said.

‘I thought Clara came next to Nelson,’ said she; ‘and a long way off too, if you’re not going to be a landlubber.’

‘I’m not going to be a landlubber, Miss Middleton, you may be absolutely positive on your solemn word.’

‘You’re getting to talk like one a little now and then, Crossjay.’

‘Then I won’t talk at all.’

He stuck to his resolution for one whole minute.

Clara hoped that on this morning of a doubtful though imperative venture she had done some good.

They walked fast to cover the distance to the village post-office, and back before the breakfast hour: and they had plenty of time, arriving too early for the opening of the door, so that Crossjay began to dance with an appetite, and was despatched to besiege a bakery. Clara felt lonely without him, apprehensively timid in the shuttered, unmoving village street. She was glad of his return. When at last her letter was handed to her, on the testimony of the postman that she was the lawful applicant, Crossjay and she put out on a sharp trot to be back at the Hall in good time. She took a swallowing glance of the first page of Lucy’s writing:

‘Telegraph, and I will meet you. I will supply you with everything you can want for the two nights, if you cannot stop longer.’

That was the gist of the letter. A second, less voracious, glance at it along the road brought sweetness: – Lucy wrote:

‘Do I love you as I did? my best friend, you must fall into unhappiness to have the answer to that.’

Clara broke a silence.

‘Yes, dear Crossjay, and if you like you shall have another walk with me after breakfast. But, remember, you must not say where you have gone with me. I shall give you twenty shillings to go and buy those birds’ eggs and the butterflies you want for your collection; and mind, promise me, to-day is your last day of truancy. Tell Mr Whitford how ungrateful you know you have been, that he may have some hope of you. You know the way across the fields to the railway station?’

‘You save a mile; you drop on the road by Combline’s mill, and then there’s another five-minutes’ cut, and the rest’s road.’

‘Then, Crossjay, immediately after breakfast run round behind the pheasantry, and there I’ll find you. And if any one comes to you before I come, say you are admiring the plumage of the Himalaya – the beautiful Indian bird; and if we’re found together, we run a race, and of course you can catch me, but you mustn’t until we’re out of sight. Tell Mr Vernon at night – tell Mr Whitford at night you had the money

from me as part of my allowance to you for pocket-money. I used to like to have pocket-money, Crossjay. And you may tell him I gave you the holiday, and I may write to him for his excuse, if he is not too harsh to grant it. He can be very harsh.'

'You look right into his eyes next time, Miss Middleton. I used to think him awful till he made me look at him. He says men ought to look straight at one another, just as we do when he gives me my boxing-lesson, and then we won't have quarrelling half so much. I can't recollect everything he says.'

'You are not bound to, Crossjay.'

'No, but you like to hear.'

'Really, dear boy. I can't accuse myself of having told you that.'

'No, but, Miss Middleton, you do. And he's fond of your singing and playing on the piano, and watches you.'

'We shall be late if we don't mind,' said Clara, starting to a pace close on a run.

They were in time for a circuit in the park to the wild double cherry-blossom, no longer all white. Clara gazed up from under it, where she had imagined a fairer visible heavenliness than any other sight of earth had ever given her. That was when Vernon lay beneath. But she had certainly looked above, not at him. The tree seemed sorrowful in its withering flowers of the colour of trodden snow.

Crossjay resumed the conversation.

'He says ladies don't like him much.'

'Who says that?'

'Mr Whitford.'

'Were those his words?'

'I forget the words: but he said they wouldn't be taught by him, like me, ever since you came; and since you came I've liked him ten times more.'

'The more you like him the more I shall like you, Crossjay.'

The boy raised a shout and scampered away to Sir Willoughby, at the appearance of whom Clara felt herself nipped and curling inward. Crossjay ran up to him with every sign of pleasure. Yet he had not mentioned him during the walk; and Clara took it for a sign that the boy understood the entire satisfaction Willoughby had in mere shows of affection, and acted up to it. Hardly blaming Crossjay, she was a critic of the scene, for the reason that youthful creatures who have ceased to love a person, hunger for evidence against him to confirm their hard animus, which will seem to them sometimes, when he is not immediately irritating them, brutish, because they can not analyze it and reduce it to the multitude of just antagonisms whereof it came. It has passed by large accumulation into a sombre and speechless load upon the senses, and fresh evidence, the smallest item, is a champion to speak for it. Being about to do wrong, she grasped at this eagerly, and brooded on the little of vital and truthful that there was in the man and how he corrupted the boy. Nevertheless, she instinctively imitated Crossjay in an almost sparkling salute to him.

'Good-morning, Willoughby; it was not a morning to lose: have you been out long?'

He retained her hand. 'My dear Clara! and you, have you not overfatigued yourself? Where have you been?'

'Round – everywhere! And I am certainly not tired.'

'Only you and Crossjay? You should have loosened the dogs.'

'Their barking would have annoyed the house.'

'Less than I am annoyed to think of you without protection.'

He kissed her fingers: it was a loving speech.

'The household…' said Clara, but would not insist to convict him of what he could not have perceived.

'If you outstrip me another morning, Clara, promise me to take the dogs; will you?'

'Yes.'

'To-day I am altogether yours.'

'Are you?'

'From the first to the last hour of it! – So you fall in with Horace's humour pleasantly?'

'He is very amusing.'

'As good as though one had hired him!'

'Here comes Colonel De Craye.'

'He must think we *have* hired him!'

She noticed the bitterness of Willoughby's tone. He sang out a good-morning to De Craye, and remarked that he must go to the stables.

'Darleton? Darleton, Miss Middleton?' said the colonel, rising from his bow to her: 'a daughter of General Darleton? If so, I have had the honour to dance with her. And have not you? – practised with her, I mean; or gone off in a triumph to dance it out as young ladies do? So you know what a delightful partner she is.'

'She is!' cried Clara, enthusiastic for her succouring friend, whose letter was the treasure in her bosom.

'Oddly, the name did not strike me yesterday, Miss Middleton. In the middle of the night it rang a little silver bell in my ear, and I remembered the lady I was half in love with, if only for her dancing. She is dark, of your height, as light on her feet; a sister in another colour. Now that I know her to be your friend…!'

'Why, you may meet her, Colonel De Craye.'

'It'll be to offer her a castaway. And one only meets a charming girl to hear that she's engaged! 'Tis not a line of a ballad, Miss Middleton, but out of the heart.'

'Lucy Darleton… You were leading me to talk seriously to you, Colonel De Craye.'

'Will you one day? – and not think me a perpetual tumbler! You have heard of melancholy clowns. You will find the face not so laughable behind my paint. When I was thirteen years younger I was loved, and my dearest sank to the grave. Since then I have not been quite at home in life; probably because of finding no one so charitable as she. 'Tis easy to win smiles and hands, but not so easy to win a woman whose faith you would trust as your own heart before the enemy. I was poor then. She said: "The day after my twenty-first birthday"; and that day I went for her, and I wondered they did not refuse me at the door. I was shown upstairs, and I saw her, and saw death. She wished to marry me, to leave me her fortune!'

'Then, never marry,' said Clara, in an underbreath.

She glanced behind.

Sir Willoughby was close, walking on turf.

'I must be cunning to escape him after breakfast,' she thought.

He had discarded his foolishness of the previous days, and the thought in him could have replied: 'I am a dolt if I let you out of my sight.'

Vernon appeared, formal as usual of late. Clara begged his excuse for withdrawing Crossjay from his morning swim. He nodded.

De Craye called to Willoughby for a book of the trains.

'There's a card in the smoking-room; eleven, one, and four are the hours, if you must go,' said Willoughby.

'You leave the Hall, Colonel De Craye?'

'In two or three days, Miss Middleton.'

She did not request him to stay: his announcement produced no effect on her. Consequently, thought he – well, what? nothing: well, then, she might not be minded to stay herself. Otherwise she would have regretted the loss of an amusing companion: that is the modest way of putting it. There is a modest and a vain for the same sentiment; and both may be simultaneously in the same breast; and each one as honest as the other; so shy is man's vanity in the presence of here and there a lady. She liked him: she did not care a pin for him – how could she? yet she liked him: O, to be able to do her some kindling bit of service! These were his consecutive fancies, resolving naturally to the exclamation, and built on the conviction that she did not love Willoughby, and waited for a spirited lift from circumstances. His call for a book of the trains had been a sheer piece of impromptu, in the mind as well as on the mouth. It sprang, unknown to him, of conjectures he had indulged yesterday and the day before. This morning she would have an answer to her letter to her friend, Miss Lucy Darleton, the pretty dark girl, whom De Craye was astonished not to have noticed more when he danced with her. She, pretty as she was, had come to his recollection through the name and rank of her father, a famous general of cavalry, and tactician in that arm. The colonel despised himself for not having been devoted to Clara Middleton's friend.

The morning's letters were on the bronze plate in the hall. Clara passed on her way to her room without inspecting them. De Craye opened an envelope and went upstairs to scribble a line. Sir Willoughby observed their absence at the solemn reading to the domestic servants in advance of breakfast. Three chairs were unoccupied. Vernon had his own notions of a mechanical service – and a precious profit he derived from them! but the other two seats returned the stare Willoughby cast at their backs with an impudence that reminded him of his friend Horace's calling for a book of the trains, when a minute afterward he admitted he was going to stay at the Hall another two days, or three. The man possessed by jealousy is never in need of matter for it: he magnifies; grass is jungle, hillocks are mountains. Willoughby's legs

crossing and uncrossing audibly, and his tight-folded arms and clearing of the throat, were faint indications of his condition.

‘Are you in fair health this morning, Willoughby?’ Dr Middleton said to him after he had closed his volumes.

‘The thing is not much questioned by those who know me intimately,’ he replied.

‘Willoughby unwell!’ and, ‘He is health incarnate!’ exclaimed the ladies Eleanor and Isabel.

Laetitia grieved for him. Sun-rays on a pest-stricken city, she thought, were like the smile of his face. She believed that he deeply loved Clara, and had learned more of her alienation.

He went into the hall to look into the well for the pair of malefactors; on fire with what he could not reveal to a soul.

De Craye was in the housekeeper’s room, talking to young Crossjay, and Mrs Montague just come up to breakfast. He had heard the boy chattering, and as the door was ajar he peeped in, and was invited to enter. Mrs Montague was very fond of hearing him talk: he paid her the familiar respect which a lady of fallen fortunes, at a certain period after the fall, enjoys as a befittingly sad souvenir, and the respectfulness of the lord of the house was more chilling.

She bewailed the boy’s trying his constitution with long walks before he had anything in him to walk on.

‘And where did you go this morning, my lad?’ said De Craye.

‘Ah, you know the ground, colonel,’ said Crossjay. ‘I am hungry! I shall eat three eggs and some bacon, and buttered cakes, and jam, then begin again, on my second cup of coffee.’

‘It’s not braggadocio,’ remarked Mrs Montague. ‘He waits empty from five in the morning till nine, and then he comes famished to my table, and eats too much.’

‘Oh! Mrs Montague, that is what the country people call roemancing. For, Colonel De Craye, I had a bun at seven o’clock. Miss Middleton forced me to go and buy it.’

‘A stale bun, my boy?’

‘Yesterday’s: there wasn’t much of a stopper to you in it, like a new bun.’

‘And where did you leave Miss Middleton when you went to buy the bun? You should never leave a lady; and the street of a country town is lonely at that early hour. Crossjay, you surprise me.’

‘She forced me to go, colonel. Indeed she did. What do I care for a bun! And she was quite safe. We could hear the people stirring in the post-office, and I met our postman going for his letter-bag. I didn’t want to go: bother the bun! – but you can’t disobey Miss Middleton. I never want to, and wouldn’t.’

‘There we’re of the same mind,’ said the colonel, and Crossjay shouted, for the lady whom they exalted was at the door.

‘You will be too tired for a ride this morning,’ De Craye said to her, descending the stairs.

She swung a bonnet by the ribands. ‘I don’t think of riding to-day.’

‘Why did you not depute your mission to me?’

‘I like to bear my own burdens, as far as I can.’

‘Miss Darleton is well?’

‘I presume so.’

‘Will you try her recollection for me?’

‘It will probably be quite as lively as yours was.’

‘Shall you see her soon?’

‘I hope so.’

Sir Willoughby met her at the foot of the stairs, but refrained from giving her a hand that shook.

‘We shall have the day together,’ he said.

Clara bowed.

At the breakfast-table she faced a clock.

De Craye took out his watch. ‘You are five and a half minutes too slow by that clock, Willoughby.’

‘The man omitted to come from Rendon to set it last week, Horace. He will find the hour too late here for him when he does come.’

One of the ladies compared the time of her watch with De Craye’s, and Clara looked at hers and gratefully noted that she was four minutes in arrear.

She left the breakfast-room at a quarter to ten, after kissing her father. Willoughby was behind her. He had been soothed by thinking of his personal advantages over De Craye, and he felt assured that if he could

be solitary with his eccentric bride and fold her in himself, he would, cutting temper adrift, be the man he had been to her not so many days back. Considering how few days back, his temper was roused, but he controlled it.

They were slightly dissenting as De Craye stepped into the hall.

'A present worth examining,' Willoughby said to her: 'and I do not dwell on the costliness. Come presently, then. I am at your disposal all day. I will drive you in the afternoon to call on Lady Busshe to offer your thanks: but you must see it first. It is laid out in the laboratory.'

'There is time before the afternoon,' said Clara.

'Wedding-presents?' interposed De Craye.

'A porcelain service from Lady Busshe, Horace.'

'Not in fragments? Let me have a look at it. I'm haunted by an idea that porcelain always goes to pieces. I'll have a look and take a hint. We're in the laboratory, Miss Middleton.'

He put his arm under Willoughby's. The resistance to him was momentary: Willoughby had the satisfaction of the thought that De Craye being with him was not with Clara; and seeing her giving orders to her maid Barclay, he deferred his claim on her company for some short period.

De Craye detained him in the laboratory, first over the China cups and saucers, and then with the latest of London – tales of youngest Cupid upon subterranean adventures, having high titles to light him. Willoughby liked the tale thus illuminated, for without the title there was no special savour in such affairs, and it pulled down his betters in rank. He was of a morality to reprobate the erring dame while he enjoyed the incidents. He could not help interrupting De Craye to point at Vernon through the window, striding this way and that, evidently on the hunt for young Crossjay. 'No one here knows how to manage the boy except myself. But go on, Horace,' he said, checking his contemptuous laugh; and Vernon did look ridiculous, out there half-drenched already in a white rain, again shuffled off by the little rascal. It seemed that he was determined to have his runaway: he struck up the avenue at full pedestrian racing pace.

'A man looks a fool cutting after a cricket-ball; but putting on steam in a storm of rain to catch a young villain out of sight, beats anything I've witnessed,' Willoughby resumed, in his amusement.

'Aiha!' said De Craye, waving a hand to accompany the melodious accent, 'there are things to beat that for fun.'

He had smoked in the laboratory, so Willoughby directed a servant to transfer the porcelain service to one of the sitting-rooms for Clara's inspection of it.

'You're a bold man,' De Craye remarked. 'The luck may be with you, though. I wouldn't handle the fragile treasure for a trifle.'

'I believe in my luck,' said Willoughby.

Clara was now sought for. The lord of the house desired her presence impatiently, and had to wait. She was in none of the lower rooms. Barclay, her maid, upon interrogation, declared she was in none of the upper. Willoughby turned sharp on De Craye: he was there.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel and Miss Dale were consulted. They had nothing to say about Clara's movements, more than that they could not understand her exceeding restlessness. The idea of her being out of doors grew serious; heaven was black, hard thunder rolled, and lightning flushed the battering rain. Men bearing umbrellas, shawls, and cloaks were dispatched on a circuit of the park. De Craye said: 'I'll be one.'

'No,' cried Willoughby, starting to interrupt him, 'I can't allow it.'

'I've the scent of a hound, Willoughby; I'll soon be on the track.'

'My dear Horace, I won't let you go.'

'Adieu, dear boy! and if the lady's discoverable, I'm the one to find her.'

He stepped to the umbrella-stand. There was then a general question whether Clara had taken her umbrella. Barclay said she had. The fact indicated a wider stroll than round inside the park: Crossjay was likewise absent. De Craye nodded to himself.

Willoughby struck a rattling blow on the barometer.

'Where's Pollington?' he called, and sent word for his man Pollington to bring big fishing-boots and waterproof wrappers.

An urgent debate within him was in progress.

Should he go forth alone on his chance of discovering Clara and forgiving her under his umbrella and cloak? or should he prevent De Craye from going forth alone on the chance he vaunted so impudently?

'You will offend me, Horace, if you insist,' he said.

‘Regard me as an instrument of destiny, Willoughby,’ replied De Craye.

‘Then we go in company.’

‘But that’s an addition of one that cancels the other by conjunction, and’s worse than simple division: for I can’t trust my wits unless I rely on them alone, you see.’

‘Upon my word, you talk at times most unintelligible stuff, to be frank with you, Horace. Give it in English.’

‘’Tis not suited, perhaps, to the genius of the language, for I thought I talked English.’

‘Oh, there’s English gibberish as well as Irish, we know!’

‘And a deal foolisher when they do go at it; for it won’t bear squeezing, we think, like Irish.’

‘Where,’ exclaimed the ladies, ‘where can she be! The storm is terrible.’

Laetitia suggested the boathouse.

‘For Crossjay hadn’t a swim this morning!’ said De Craye.

No one reflected on the absurdity that Clara should think of taking Crossjay for a swim in the lake, and immediately after his breakfast: it was accepted as a suggestion, at least that she and Crossjay had gone to the lake for a row.

In the hopefulness of the idea, Willoughby suffered De Craye to go on his chance unaccompanied. He was near chuckling. He projected a plan for dismissing Crossjay and remaining in the boathouse with Clara, luxuriating in the prestige which would attach to him for seeking and finding her Deadly sentiments intervened. Still he might expect to be alone with her where she could not slip from him.

The throwing open of the hall-doors for the gentlemen presented a framed picture of a deluge. All the young-leaved trees were steely black, without a gradation of green, drooping and pouring, and the song of rain had become an inveterate hiss.

The ladies beholding it exclaimed against Clara, even apostrophized her, so dark are trivial errors when circumstances frown. She must be mad to tempt such weather: she was very giddy; she was never at rest. Clara! Clara! how could you be so wild! Ought we not to tell Dr Middleton?

Laetitia induced them to spare him.

‘Which way do you take?’ said Willoughby, rather fearful that his companion was not to be got rid of now.

‘Any way,’ said De Craye. ‘I chuck up my head like a halfpenny, and go by the toss.’

This enrageing nonsense drove off Willoughby. De Craye saw him cast a furtive eye at his heels to make sure he was not followed, and thought, ‘Jove! he may be fond of her. But he’s not on the track. She’s a determined girl, if I’m correct. She’s a girl of a hundred thousand. Girls like that make the right sort of wives for the right men. They’re the girls to make men think of marrying. To-morrow! only give me a chance. They stick to you fast when they do stick.’

Then a thought of her flower-like drapery and face caused him fervently to hope she had escaped the storm.

Calling at the West park-lodge he heard that Miss Middleton had been seen passing through the gate with Master Crossjay; but she had not been seen coming back. Mr Vernon Whitford had passed through half an hour later.

‘After his young man!’ said the colonel.

The lodge-keeper’s wife and daughter knew of Master Crossjay’s pranks; Mr Whitford, they said, had made inquiries about him, and must have caught him and sent him home to change his dripping things; for Master Crossjay had come back, and had declined shelter in the lodge; he seemed to be crying; he went away soaking over the wet grass, hanging his head. The opinion at the lodge was that Master Crossjay was unhappy.

‘He very properly received a wigging from Mr Whitford, I have no doubt,’ said Colonel De Craye.

Mother and daughter supposed it to be the case, and considered Crossjay very wilful for not going straight home to the Hall to change his wet clothes; he was drenched.

De Craye drew out his watch. The time was ten minutes past eleven. If the surmise he had distantly spied was correct, Miss Middleton would have been caught in the storm midway to her destination. By his guess at her character (knowledge of it, he would have said), he judged that no storm would daunt her on a predetermined expedition. He deduced in consequence that she was at the present moment flying to her friend, the charming brunette Lucy Darleton.

Still, as there was a possibility of the rain having been too much for her, and as he had no other

speculation concerning the route she had taken, he decided upon keeping along the road to Rendon, with a keen eye at cottage and farmhouse windows.

CHAPTER 26

Vernon in Pursuit

THE lodgekeeper had a son, who was a chum of Master Crossjay's, and errant-fellow with him upon many adventures; for this boy's passion was to become a gamekeeper, and accompanied by one of the head-gamekeeper's youngsters, he and Crossjay were in the habit of rangeing over the country, preparing for a profession delightful to the tastes of all three. Crossjay's prospective connection with the mysterious ocean bestowed the title of captain on him by common consent; he led them, and when missing for lessons he was generally in the society of Jacob Croom or Jonathan Fernaway. Vernon made sure of Crossjay when he perceived Jacob Croom sitting on a stool in the little lodge-parlour. Jacob's appearance of a diligent perusal of a book he had presented to the lad, he took for a decent piece of trickery. It was with amazement that he heard from the mother and daughter, as well as Jacob, of Miss Middleton's going through the gate before ten o'clock with Crossjay beside her, the latter too hurried to spare a nod to Jacob. That she, of all on earth, should be encouraging Crossjay to truancy was incredible. Vernon had to fall back upon Greek and Latin aphoristic shots at the sex to believe it.

Rain was universal; a thick robe of it swept from hill to hill; thunder rumbled remote, and between the ruffled roars the downpour pressed on the land with a great noise of eager gobbling, much like that of the swine's trough fresh filled, as though a vast assembly of the hungered had seated themselves clamorously and fallen to on meats and drinks in a silence, save of the chaps. A rapid walker poetically and humourously minded gathers multitudes of images on his way. And rain, the heaviest you can meet, is a lively companion when the resolute pacer scorns discomfort of wet clothes and squealing boots. South-western rain-clouds, too, are never long sullen: they enfold and will have the earth in a good strong glut of the kissing overflow; then, as a hawk with feathers on his beak of the bird in his claw lifts head, they rise and take veiled feature in long climbing watery lines: at any moment they may break the veil and show soft upper cloud, show sun on it, show sky, green near the verge they spring from, of the green of grass in early dew; or, along a travelling sweep that rolls asunder overhead, heaven's laughter of purest blue among titanic white shoulders: it may mean fair smiling for awhile,

or be the lightest interlude; but the water lines, and the drifting, the chasing, the upsoaring, all in a shadowy fingering of form, and the animation of the leaves of the trees pointing them on, the bending of the tree-tops, the snapping of branches, and the hurrahings of the stubborn hedge at wrestle with the flaws, yielding but a leaf at most, and that on a fling, make a glory of contest and wildness without aid of colour to inflame the man who is at home in them from old association on road, heath, and mountain. Let him be drenched, his heart will sing. And thou, trim cockney, that jeerest, consider thyself, to whom it may occur to be out in such a scene, and with what steps of a nervous dancing-master it would be thine to play the hunted rat of the elements, for the preservation of the one imagined dry spot about thee, somewhere on thy luckless person! The taking of rain and sun alike befits men of our climate, and he who would have the secret of a strengthening intoxication must court the clouds of the South-west with a lover's blood.

Vernon's happy recklessness was dashed by fears for Miss Middleton. Apart from those fears, he had the pleasure of a gull wheeling among foam-streaks of the wave. He supposed the Swiss and Tyrol Alps to have hidden their heads from him for many a day to come, and the springing and chiming South-west was the next best thing. A milder rain descended; the country expanded darkly defined underneath the moving curtain; the clouds were as he liked to see them, scaling; but their skirts dragged. Torrents were in store, for they coursed streamingly still and had not the higher lift, or eagle ascent, which he knew for one of the signs of fairness, nor had the hills any belt of mist-like vapour.

On a step of the stile leading to the short-cut to Rendon young Crossjay was espied. A man-tramp sat on the top-bar.

'There you are; what are you doing there? Where's Miss Middleton?' said Vernon. 'Now, take care before you open your mouth.'

Crossjay shut the mouth he had opened.

‘The lady has gone away over to a station, sir,’ said the tramp.

‘You fool!’ roared Crossjay, ready to fly at him.

‘But ain’t it now, young gentleman? Can you say it ain’t?’

‘I gave you a shilling, you ass!’

‘You give me that sum, young gentleman, to stop here and take care of you, and here I stopped.’

‘Mr Whitford!’ Crossjay appealed to his master, and broke off in disgust. ‘Take care of me! As if anybody who knows me would think I wanted taking care of! Why, what a beast you must be, you fellow!’

‘Just as you like, young gentleman. I chaunted you all I know, to keep up your downcast spirits. You did want comforting. You wanted it rarely. You cried like an infant.’

‘I let you “chaunt”, as you call it, to keep you from swearing.’

‘And why did I swear, young gentleman? because I’ve got an itchy coat in the wet, and no shirt for a lining. And no breakfast to give me a stomach for this kind of weather. That’s what I’ve come to in this world! I’m a walking moral. No wonder I swears, when I don’t strike up a chaunt.’

‘But why are you sitting here wet through, Crossjay! Be off home at once, and change, and get ready for me.’

‘Mr Whitford, I promised, and I tossed this fellow a shilling not to go bothering Miss Middleton.’

‘The lady wouldn’t have none o’ the young gentleman, sir, and I offered to go pioneer for her to the station, behind her, at a respectful distance.’

‘As if! – you treacherous cur!’ Crossjay ground his teeth at the betrayer. ‘Well, Mr Whitford, and I didn’t trust him, and I stuck to him, or he’d have been after her whining about his coat and stomach, and talking of his being a moral. He repeats that to everybody.’

‘She has gone to the station?’ said Vernon.

Not a word on that subject was to be won from Crossjay.

‘How long since?’ Vernon partly addressed Mr Tramp.

The latter became seized with shivers as he supplied the information that it might be a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. ‘But what’s time to me, sir? If I had reg’lar meals, I should carry a clock in my inside. I got the rheumatics instead.’

‘Way there!’ Vernon cried, and took the stile at a vault.

‘That’s what gentlemen can do, who sleeps in their beds warm,’ moaned the tramp. ‘They’ve no joints.’

Vernon handed him a half-crown piece, for he had been of use for once.

‘Mr Whitford, let me come. If you tell me to come I may. Do let me come,’ Crossjay begged with great entreaty. ‘I sha’n’t see her for…’

‘Be off, quick!’ Vernon cut him short and pushed on.

The tramp and Crossjay were audible to him; Crossjay spurning the consolations of the professional sad man.

Vernon spun across the fields, timing himself by his watch to reach Rendon station ten minutes before eleven, though without clearly questioning the nature of the resolution which precipitated him. Dropping to the road, he had better foothold than on the slippery field-path, and he ran. His principal hope was that Clara would have missed her way. Another pelting of rain agitated him on her behalf. Might she not as well be suffered to go? – and sit three hours and more in a railway-carriage with wet feet!

He clasped the visionary little feet to warm them on his breast. – But Willoughby’s obstinate fatuity deserved the blow! – But neither she nor her father deserved the scandal. But she was desperate. Could reasoning touch her? If not, what would? He knew of nothing. Yesterday he had spoken strongly to Willoughby, to plead with him to favour her departure and give her leisure to sound her mind, and he had left his cousin, convinced that Clara’s best measure was flight: a man so cunning in a pretended obtuseness backed by senseless pride, and in petty tricks that sprang of a grovelling tyranny, could only be taught by facts.

Her recent treatment of him, however, was very strange; so strange that he might have known himself better if he had reflected on the bound with which it shot him to a hard suspicion. De Craye had prepared the world to hear that he was leaving the Hall. Were they in concert? The idea struck at his heart colder than if her damp little feet had been there.

Vernon’s full exoneration of her for making a confidant of himself, did not extend its leniency to the young lady’s character when there was question of her doing the same with a second gentleman. He could suspect much: he could even expect to find De Craye at the station.

That idea drew him up in his run, to meditate on the part he should play; and by drove little Dr Corney on the way to Rendon, and hailed him, and gave his cheerless figure the nearest approach to an Irish hug in the form of a dry seat under an umbrella and water-proof covering.

'Though it is the worst I can do for you, if you decline to supplement it with a dose of hot brandy and water at the Dolphin,' said he: 'and I'll see you take it, if you please. I'm bound to ease a Rendon patient out of the world. Medicine's one of their superstitions, which they cling to the harder the more useless it gets. Pill and priest launch him happy between them. – "And what's on your conscience, Pat?" – "It's whether your blessing, your Riverence, would disagree with another drop." "Then put the horse before the cart, my son, and you shall have the two in harmony, and God speed ye!" – Rendon station, did you say, Vernon? You shall have my prescription at the Railway Arms, if you're hurried. You have the look. What is it? Can I help?'

'No. And don't ask.'

'You're like the Irish Grenadier who had a bullet in a humiliating situation. Here's Rendon, and through it we go with a spanking clatter. Here's Doctor Corney's dog-cart post-haste again. For there's no dying without him now, and Repentance is on the death-bed for not calling him in before. Haifa charge of humbug hurts no son of a gun, friend Vernon, if he'd have his firing take effect. Be tender to't in man or woman, particularly woman. So, by goes the meteoric doctor, and I'll bring noses to window-panes, you'll see, which reminds me of the sweetest young lady *I* ever saw, and the luckiest man. When is she off for her bridal trousseau? And when are they spliced? I'll not call her perfection, for that's a post, afraid to move. But she's a dancing sprig of the tree next it. Poetry's wanted to speak of her. I'm Irish and inflammable, I suppose, but I never looked on a girl to make a man comprehend the entire holy meaning of the word rapturous, like that one. And away she goes! We'll not say another word. But you're a Grecian, friend Vernon. Now, couldn't you think her just a whiff of an idea of a daughter of a peccadillo-Goddess?'

'Deuce take you, Corney, drop me here; I shall be late for the train,' said Vernon, laying hand on the doctor's arm to check him on the way to the station in view.

Dr Corney had a Celtic intelligence for a meaning behind an illogical tongue. He drew up, observing: 'Two minutes run won't hurt you.'

He slightly fancied he might have given offence, though he was well acquainted with Vernon and had a cordial grasp at the parting.

The truth must be told that Vernon could not at the moment bear any more talk from an Irishman. Dr Corney had succeeded in persuading him not to wonder at Clara Middleton's liking for Colonel de Craye.

CHAPTER 27

⌘⌘⌘⌘

At the Railway Station

CLARA stood in the waiting-room contemplating the white rails of the rain-swept line. Her lips parted at the sight of Vernon.

'You have your ticket?' said he.

She nodded, and breathed more freely; the matter-of-fact question was reassuring.

'You are wet,' he resumed; and it could not be denied.

'A little. I do not feel it.'

'I must beg you to come to the inn hard by – half a dozen steps. We shall see your train signalled. Come.'

She thought him startlingly authoritative, but he had good sense to back him; and depressed as she was by the dampness, she was disposed to yield to reason if he continued to respect her independence. So she submitted outwardly, resisted inwardly, on the watch to stop him from taking any decisive lead.

'Shall we be sure to see the signal, Mr Whitford?'

'I'll provide for that.'

He spoke to the station-clerk, and conducted her across the road.

'You are quite alone, Miss Middleton?'

'I am: I have not brought my maid.'

‘You must take off boots and stockings at once, and have them dried. I’ll put you in the hands of the landlady.’

‘But my train!’

‘You have full fifteen minutes, besides fair chances of delay.’

He seemed reasonable, the reverse of hostile, in spite of his commanding air, and that was not unpleasant in one friendly to her adventure. She controlled her alert mistrustfulness, and passed from him to the landlady, for her feet were wet and cold, the skirts of her dress were soiled; generally inspecting herself, she was an object to be shuddered at, and she was grateful to Vernon for his inattention to her appearance.

Vernon ordered Dr Corney’s dose, and was ushered upstairs to a room of portraits, where the publican’s ancestors and family sat against the walls, flat on their canvas as weeds of the botanist’s portfolio, although corpulency was pretty generally insisted on, and there were formidable battalions of bust among the females. All of them had the aspect of the national energy which has vanquished obstacles to subside on its ideal. They all gazed straight at the guest. ‘Drink, and come to this!’ they might have been labelled to say to him. He was in the private Walhalla of a large class of his countrymen. The existing host had taken forethought to be of the party in his prime, and in the central place, looking fresh-fattened there and sanguine from the performance. By and by a son would shove him aside; meanwhile he shelved his parent, according to the manners of energy.

One should not be a critic of our works of Art in uncomfortable garments. Vernon turned from the portraits to a stuffed pike in a glass case, and plunged into sympathy with the fish for a refuge.

Clara soon rejoined him, saying: ‘But you, you must be very wet. You were without an umbrella. You must be wet through, Mr Whitford.’

‘We’re all wet through, to-day,’ said Vernon. ‘Crossjay’s wet through, and a tramp he met.’

‘The horrid man! But Crossjay should have turned back when I told him. Cannot the landlord assist you? You are not tied to time. I begged Crossjay to turn back when it began to rain: when it became heavy I compelled him. So you met my poor Crossjay?’

‘You have not to blame him for betraying you. The tramp did that. I was thrown on your track quite by accident. Now pardon me for using authority, and don’t be alarmed, Miss Middleton; you are perfectly free for me; but you must not run a risk to your health. I met Doctor Corney coming along, and he prescribed hot brandy and water for a wet skin, especially for sitting in it. There’s the stuff on the table; I see you have been aware of a singular odour; you must consent to sip some, as medicine; merely to give you warmth.’

‘Impossible, Mr Whitford: I could not taste it. But pray, obey Dr Corney, if he ordered it for you.’

‘I can’t, unless you do.’

‘I will, then: I will try.’

She held the glass, attempted, and was baffled by the reek of it.

‘Try: you can do anything,’ said Vernon.

‘Now that you find me here, Mr Whitford! Anything for myself, it would seem, and nothing to save a friend. But I will really try.’

‘It must be a good mouthful.’

‘I will try. And you will finish the glass?’

‘With your permission, if you do not leave too much.’

They were to drink out of the same glass; and she was to drink some of this infamous mixture: and she was in a kind of hotel alone with him: and he was drenched in running after her: – all this came of breaking loose for an hour.

‘Oh, what a misfortune that it should be such a day, Mr Whitford!’

‘Did you not choose the day?’

‘Not the weather.’

‘And the worst of it is, that Willoughby will come upon Crossjay wet to the bone, and pump him and get nothing but shufflings, blank lies, and then find him out and chase him from the house.’

Clara drank immediately, and more than she intended. She held the glass as an enemy to be delivered from, gasping, uncertain of her breath.

‘Never let me be asked to endure such a thing again.’

‘You are unlikely to be running away from father and friends again.’

She panted still with the fiery liquid she had gulped: and she wondered that it should belie its reputation in not fortifying her, but rendering her painfully susceptible to his remarks.

‘Mr Whitford, I need not seek to know what you think of me.’

‘What I think? I don’t think at all; I wish to serve you if I can.’

‘Am I right in supposing you a little afraid of me? You should not be. I have deceived no one. I have opened my heart to you, and am not ashamed of having done so.’

‘It is an excellent habit, they say.’

‘It is not a habit with me.’

He was touched, and for that reason, in his dissatisfaction with himself, not unwilling to hurt. ‘We take our turn, Miss Middleton. I’m no hero, and a bad conspirator, so I am not of much avail.’

‘You have been reserved – but I am going, and I leave my character behind. You condemned me to the poison-bowl; you have not touched it yourself.’

‘In vino veritas: if I do I shall be speaking my mind.’

‘Then do, for the sake of mind and body.’

‘It won’t be complimentary.’

‘You can be harsh. Only say everything.’

‘Have we time?’

They looked at their watches.

‘Six minutes,’ Clara said.

Vernon’s had stopped, penetrated by his total drenching.

She reproached herself. He laughed to quiet her. ‘My dies solemnes are sure to give me duckings; I’m used to them. As for the watch, it will remind me that it stopped when you went.’

She raised the glass to him. She was happier and hoped for some little harshness and kindness mixed that she might carry away to travel with and think over.

He turned the glass as she had given it, turned it round in putting it to his lips: a scarce perceptible manœuvre, but that she had given it expressly on one side.

It may be hoped that it was not done by design. Done even accidentally, without a taint of contrivance, it was an affliction to see, and coiled through her, causing her to shrink and redden.

Fugitives are subject to strange incidents; they are not vessels lying safe in harbour. She shut her lips tight, as if they had stung. The realizing sensitiveness of her quick nature accused them of a loss of bloom. And the man who made her smart like this was formal as a railway official on a platform.

‘Now we are both pledged in the poison-bowl,’ said he. ‘And it has the taste of rank poison, I confess. But the doctor prescribed it, and at sea we must be sailors. Now, Miss Middleton, time presses: will you return with me?’

‘No! no!’

‘Where do you propose to go?’

‘To London; to a friend – Miss Darleton.’

‘What message is there for your father?’

‘Say I have left a letter for him in a letter to be delivered to you.’

‘To me! And what message for Willoughby?’

‘My maid Barclay will hand him a letter at noon.’

‘You have sealed Crossjay’s fate.’

‘How?’

‘He is probably at this instant undergoing an interrogation. You may guess at his replies. The letter will expose him, and Willoughby does not pardon.’

‘I regret it. I cannot avoid it. Poor boy! My dear Crossjay! I did not think of how Willoughby might punish him. I was very thoughtless. Mr Whitford, my pin-money shall go for his education. Later, when I am a little older, I shall be able to support him.’

‘That’s an encumbrance; you should not tie yourself to drag it about. You are unalterable, of course, but circumstances are not, and as it happens, women are more subject to them than we are.’

‘But I will not be!’

‘Your command of them is shown at the present moment.’

‘Because I determine to be free?’

‘No: because you do the contrary; you don’t determine: you run away from the difficulty, and leave it to your father and friends to bear. As for Crossjay, you see you destroy one of his chances. I should have

carried him off before this, if I had not thought it prudent to keep him on terms with Willoughby. We'll let Crossjay stand aside. He'll behave like a man of honour, imitating others who have had to do the same for ladies.'

'Have spoken falsely to shelter cowards, you mean, Mr Whitford. Oh, I know. – I have but two minutes. The die is cast. I cannot go back. I must get ready. Will you see me to the station? I would rather you should hurry home.'

'I will see the last of you. I will wait for you here. An express runs ahead of your train, and I have arranged with the clerk for a signal; I have an eye on the window.'

'You are still my best friend, Mr Whitford.'

'Though?'

'Well, though you do not perfectly understand what torments have driven me to this.'

'Carried on tides and blown by winds?'

'Ah! you do not understand.'

'Mysteries?'

'Sufferings are not mysteries, they are very simple facts.'

'Well, then, I don't understand. But decide at once. I wish you to have your free will.'

She left the room.

Dry stockings and boots are better for travelling in than wet ones, but in spite of her direct resolve, she felt when drawing them on like one that has been tripped. The goal was desirable, the ardour was damped. Vernon's wish that she should have her free will compelled her to sound it: and it was of course to go, to be liberated, to cast off incubus and hurt her father? injure Crossjay? distress her friends? No, and ten times no!

She returned to Vernon in haste, to shun the reflex of her mind.

He was looking at a closed carriage drawn up at the station door.

'Shall we run over now, Mr Whitford?'

'There's no signal. Here it's not so chilly.'

'I ventured to enclose my letter to papa in yours, trusting you would attend to my request to you to break the news to him gently and plead for me.'

'We will all do the utmost we can.'

'I am doomed to vex those who care for me. I tried to follow your counsel.'

'First you spoke to me, and then you spoke to Miss Dale; and at least you have a clear conscience.'

'No.'

'What burdens it?'

'I have done nothing to burden it.'

'Then it's a clear conscience.'

'No.'

Vernon's shoulders jerked. Our patience with an innocent duplicity in women is measured by the place it assigns to us and another. If he had liked he could have thought: 'You have not done but meditated something to trouble conscience.' That was evident, and her speaking of it was proof too of the willingness to be clear. He would not help her. Man's blood, which is the link with women and responsive to them on the instant for or against, obscured him. He shrugged anew when she said: 'My character would have been degraded utterly by my staying there. Could you advise it?'

'Certainly not the degradation of your character,' he said, black on the subject of De Craye, and not lightened by feelings which made him sharply sensible of the beggarly dependant that he was, or poor adventuring scribbler that he was to become.

'Why did you pursue me and wish to stop me, Mr Whitford?' said Clara, on the spur of a wound from his tone.

He replied: 'I suppose I'm a busybody; I was never aware of it till now.'

'You are my friend. Only you speak in irony so much. That was irony, about my clear conscience. I spoke to you and to Miss Dale: and then I rested and drifted. Can you not feel for me, that to mention it is like a scorching furnace? Willoughby has entangled papa. He schemes incessantly to keep me entangled. I fly from his cunning as much as from anything. I dread it. I have told you that I am more to blame than he, but I must accuse him. And wedding-presents! and congratulations! And to be his guest!'

'All that makes up a plea in mitigation,' said Vernon.

‘Is it not sufficient for you?’ she asked him, timidly.

‘You have a masculine good sense that tells you you won’t be respected if you run. Three more days there might cover a retreat with your father.’

‘He will not listen to me. He confuses me; Willoughby has bewitched him.’

‘Commission me: I will see that he listens.’

‘And go back? Oh, no! To London! Besides, there is the dining with Mrs Mountstuart this evening; and I like her very well, but I must avoid her. She has a kind of idolatry… And what answers can I give? I supplicate her with looks. She observes them, my efforts to divert them from being painful produce a comic expression to her, and I am a charming “rogue”, and I am entertained on the topic she assumes to be principally interesting me. I must avoid her. The thought of her leaves me no choice. She is clever. She could tattoo me with epigrams.’

‘Stay: there you can hold your own.’

‘She has told me you give me credit for a spice of wit. I have not discovered my possession. We have spoken of it; we call it your delusion. She grants me some beauty; that must be hers.’

‘There’s no delusion in one case or the other, Miss Middleton. You have beauty and wit; public opinion will say, wildness: indifference to your reputation will be charged on you, and your friends will have to admit it. But you will be out of *this* difficulty.’

‘Ah – to weave a second?’

‘Impossible to judge until we see how you escape the first. And I have no more to say. I love your father. His humour of sententiousness and doctorial stilts is a mask he delights in, but you ought to know him and not be frightened by it. If you sat with him an hour at a Latin task, and if you took his hand and told him you could not leave him, and no tears! – he would answer you at once. It would involve a day or two further; disagreeable to you, no doubt: preferable to the present mode of escape, as I think. But I have no power whatever to persuade. I have not the “lady’s tongue”. My appeal is always to reason.’

‘It is a compliment. I loathe the “lady’s tongue”.’

‘It’s a distinctly good gift, and I wish I had it. I might have succeeded instead of failing, and appearing to pay a compliment.’

‘Surely the express train is very late, Mr Whitford?’

‘The express has gone by.’

‘Then we will cross over.’

‘You would rather not be seen by Mrs Mountstuart. That is her carriage drawn up at the station, and she is in it.’

Clara looked, and with the sinking of her heart said: ‘I must brave her!’

‘In that case I will take my leave of you here, Miss Middleton.’

She gave him her hand. ‘Why is Mrs Mountstuart at the station to-day?’

‘I suppose she has driven to meet one of the guests for her dinner-party. Professor Crooklyn was promised to your father, and he may be coming by the down-train.’

‘Go back to the Hall!’ exclaimed Clara. ‘How can I? I have no more endurance left in me. If I had some support! – if it were the sense of secretly doing wrong, it might help me through. I am in a web. I cannot do right, whatever I do. There is only the thought of saving Crossjay. Yes, and sparing papa. – Good-bye, Mr Whitford. I shall remember your kindness gratefully. I cannot go back.’

‘You will not?’ said he, tempting her to hesitate.

‘No.’

‘But if you are seen by Mrs Mountstuart, you must go back. I’ll do my best to take her away. Should she see you you must patch up a story and apply to her for a lift. That, I think, is imperative.’

‘Not to my mind,’ said Clara.

He bowed hurriedly, and withdrew. After her confession, peculiar to her, of possibly finding sustainment in secretly doing wrong, her flying or remaining seemed to him a choice of evils: and whilst she stood in bewildered speculation on his reason for pursuing her – which was not evident – he remembered the special fear inciting him, and so far did her justice as to have at himself on that subject. He had done something perhaps to save her from a cold: such was his only consolatory thought. He had also behaved like a man of honour, taking no personal advantage of her situation; but to reflect on it recalled his astonishing dryness. The strict man of honour plays a part that he should not reflect on till about the fall of the curtain, otherwise he will be likely sometimes to feel the shiver of foolishness at his good conduct.

CHAPTER 28

The Return

POSTED in observation at a corner of the window Clara saw Vernon cross the road to Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's carriage, transformed to the leanest pattern of himself by narrowed shoulders and raised coat-collar. He had such an air of saying, 'Tom's a-cold', that her skin crept in sympathy.

Presently he left the carriage and went into the station: a bell had rung. Was it her train? He approved her going, for he was employed in assisting her to go: a proceeding at variance with many things he had said, but he was as full of contradiction to-day as women are accused of being. The train came up. She trembled: no signal had appeared, and Vernon must have deceived her.

He returned; he entered the carriage, and the wheels were soon in motion. Immediately thereupon, Flitch's fly drove past, containing Colonel De Craye.

Vernon could not but have perceived him.

But what was it that had brought the colonel to this place? The pressure of Vernon's mind was on her and foiled her efforts to assert her perfect innocence, though she knew she had done nothing to allure the colonel hither. Excepting Willoughby, Colonel De Craye was the last person she would have wished to encounter.

She had now a dread of hearing the bell which would tell her that Vernon had not deceived her, and that she was out of his hands, in the hands of some one else.

She bit at her glove; she glanced at the concentrated eyes of the publican's family portraits, all looking as one; she noticed the empty tumbler, and went round to it and touched it, and the silly spoon in it.

A little yielding to desperation shoots us to strange distances!

Vernon had asked her whether she was alone. Connecting that inquiry, singular in itself, and singular in his manner of putting it, with the glass of burning liquid, she repeated: 'He must have seen Colonel De Craye!' and she stared at the empty glass, as at something that witnessed to something: for Vernon was not your supple cavalier assiduously on the smirk to pin a gallantry to commonplaces. But all the doors are not open in a young lady's consciousness, quick of nature though she may be: some are locked and keyless, some will not open to the key, some are defended by ghosts inside. She could not have said what the something witnessed to. If we by chance know more, we have still no right to make it more prominent than it was with her. And the smell of the glass was odious; it disgraced her. She had an impulse to pocket the spoon for a memento, to show it to grandchildren for a warning. Even the prelude to the morality to be uttered on the occasion sprang to her lips: 'Here, my dears, is a spoon you would be ashamed to use in your teacups, yet it was of more value to me at one period of my life than silver and gold in pointing out, etc.': the conclusion was hazy, like the conception; she had her idea.

And in this mood she ran down-stairs and met Colonel De Craye on the station steps.

The bright illumination of his face was that of the confident man confirmed in a risky guess in the crisis of doubt and dispute.

'Miss Middleton!' his joyful surprise predominated; the pride of an accurate forecast, adding: 'I am not too late to be of service?'

She thanked him for the offer.

'Have you dismissed the fly, Colonel De Craye?'

'I have just been getting change to pay Mr Flitch. He passed me on the road. He is interwound with our fates to a certainty. I had only to jump in; I knew it, and rolled along like a magician commanding a genie.'

'Have I been…'

'Not seriously, nobody doubts you being under shelter. You will allow me to protect you? My time is yours.'

'I was thinking of a running visit to my friend Miss Darleton.'

'May I venture? I had the fancy that you wished to see Miss Darleton to-day. You cannot make the journey unescorted.'

'Please retain the fly. Where is Willoughby?'

'He is in jack-boots. But may I not, Miss Middleton? I shall never be forgiven if you refuse me.'

‘There has been searching for me?’

‘Some hallooing. But why am I rejected? Besides, I don’t require the fly; I shall walk if I am banished. Flitch is a wonderful conjurer, but the virtue is out of him for the next four-and-twenty hours. And it will be an opportunity to me to make my bow to Miss Darleton!’

‘She is rigorous on the conventionalities, Colonel De Craye.’

‘I’ll appear before her as an ignoramus or a rebel, whichever she likes best to take in leading-strings. I remember her. I was greatly struck by her.’

‘Upon recollection!’

‘Memory didn’t happen to be handy at the first mention of the lady’s name. As the general said of his ammunition and transport, there’s the army! – but it was leagues in the rear. Like the footman who went to sleep after smelling fire in the house, I was thinking of other things. It will serve me right to be forgotten – if I am. I’ve a curiosity to know: a remainder of my coxcombry. Not that exactly: a wish to see the impression I made on your friend. – None at all? But any pebble casts a ripple.’

‘That is hardly an impression,’ said Clara, pacifying her irresoluteness with this light talk.

‘The utmost to be hoped for by men like me! I have your permission? – one minute – I will get my ticket.’

‘Do not,’ said Clara.

‘Your man-servant entreats you!’

She signified a decided negative with the head, but her eyes were dreamy. She breathed deep: this thing done would cut the cord. Her sensation of languor swept over her.

De Craye took a stride. He was accosted by one of the railway-porters. Flitch’s fly was in request for a gentleman. A portly old gentleman bothered about luggage appeared on the landing.

‘The gentleman can have it,’ said De Craye, handing Flitch his money.

‘Open the door,’ Clara said to Flitch.

He tugged at the handle with enthusiasm. The door was open: she stepped in.

‘Then mount the box and I’ll jump up beside you,’ De Craye called out, after the passion of regretful astonishment had melted from his features.

Clara directed him to the seat fronting her; he protested indifference to the wet; she kept the door unshut. His temper would have preferred to buffet the angry weather. The invitation was too sweet.

She heard now the bell of her own train. Driving beside the railway embankment she met the train: it was eighteen minutes late, by her watch. And why, when it flung up its whale-spouts of steam, she was not journeying in it, she could not tell. She had acted of her free will: that she could say. Vernon had not induced her to remain; assuredly her present companion had not; and her whole heart was for flight: yet she was driving back to the Hall, not devoid of calmness. She speculated on the circumstance enough to think herself incomprehensible, and there left it, intent on the scene to come with Willoughby.

‘I must choose a better day for London,’ she remarked.

De Craye bowed, but did not remove his eyes from her.

‘Miss Middleton, you do not trust me.’

She answered: ‘Say in what way. It seems to me that I do.’

‘I may speak?’

‘If it depends on my authority.’

‘Fully?’

‘Whatever you have to say. Let me stipulate, be not very grave. I want cheering in wet weather.’

‘Miss Middleton, Flitch is charioteer once more. Think of it. There’s a tide that carries him perpetually to the place where he was cast forth, and a thread that ties us to him in continuity. I have not the honour to be a friend of long standing: one ventures on one’s devotion: it dates from the first moment of my seeing you. Flitch is to blame, if any one. Perhaps the spell would be broken, were he reinstated in his ancient office.’

‘Perhaps it would,’ said Clara, not with her best of smiles. Willoughby’s pride of relentlessness appeared to her to be receiving a blow by rebound, and that seemed high justice.

‘I am afraid you were right; the poor fellow has no chance,’ De Craye pursued. He paused, as for decorum in the presence of misfortune, and laughed sparklingly: ‘Unless I engage him, or pretend to! I verily believe that Flitch’s melancholy person on the skirts of the Hall completes the picture of the Eden within. – Why will you not put some trust in me, Miss Middleton?’

‘But why should you not pretend to engage him then, Colonel De Craye?’

‘We’ll plot it, if you like. Can you trust me for that?’

‘For any act of disinterested kindness, I am sure.’

‘You mean it?’

‘Without reserve. You could talk publicly of taking him to London.’

‘Miss Middleton, just now you were going. My arrival changed your mind. You distrust me: and ought I to wonder? The wonder would be all the other way. You have not had the sort of report of me which would persuade you to confide, even in a case of extremity. I guessed you were going. Do you ask me how? I cannot say. Through what they call sympathy, and that’s inexplicable. There’s natural sympathy, natural antipathy. People have to live together to discover how deep it is!’

Clara breathed her dumb admission of his truth.

The fly jolted and threatened to lurch.

‘Flitch, my dear man!’ the colonel gave a murmuring remonstrance; ‘for,’ said he to Clara, whom his apostrophe to Flitch had set smiling, ‘we’re not safe with him, however we make believe, and he’ll be jerking the heart out of me before he has done. – But if two of us have not the misfortune to be united when they come to the discovery, there’s hope. That is, if one has courage and the other has wisdom. Otherwise they may go to the yoke in spite of themselves. The great enemy is Pride, who has them both in a coach and drives them to the fatal door, and the only thing to do is to knock him off his box while there’s a minute to spare. And as there’s no pride like the pride of possession, the deadliest wound to him is to make that doubtful. Pride won’t be taught wisdom in any other fashion. But one must have the courage to do it!’

De Craye trifled with the window-sash, to give his words time to sink in solution.

Who but Willoughby stood for Pride? And who, swayed by languor, had dreamed of a method that would be surest and swiftest to teach him the wisdom of surrendering her?

‘You know, Miss Middleton, I study character,’ said the colonel.

‘I see that you do,’ she answered.

‘You intend to return?’

‘Oh, decidedly.’

‘The day is unfavourable for travelling, I must say.’

‘It is.’

‘You may count on my discretion in the fullest degree. I throw myself on your generosity when I assure you that it was not my design to surprise a secret. I guessed the station, and went there, to put myself at your disposal.’

‘Did you,’ said Clara, reddening slightly, ‘chance to see Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson’s carriage pass you when you drove up to the station?’

De Craye had passed a carriage. ‘I did not see the lady. She was in it?’

‘Yes. And therefore it is better to put discretion on one side: we may be certain she saw you.’

‘But not you, Miss Middleton.’

‘I prefer to think that I am seen. I have a description of courage, Colonel De Craye, when it is forced on me.’

‘I have not suspected the reverse. Courage wants training, as well as other fine capacities. Mine is often rusty and rheumatic.’

‘I cannot hear of concealment or plotting.’

‘Except, pray, to advance the cause of poor Flitch!’

‘He shall be excepted.’

The colonel screwed his head round for a glance at his coachman’s back.

‘Perfectly guaranteed to-day!’ he said of Flitch’s look of solidity. ‘The convulsion of the elements appears to sober our friend; he is only dangerous in calms. Five minutes will bring us to the park-gates.’

Clara leaned forward to gaze at the hedgeways in the neighbourhood of the Hall strangely renewing their familiarity with her. Both in thought and sensation she was like a flower beaten to earth, and she thanked her feminine mask for not showing how nerveless and languid she was. She could have accused Vernon of a treacherous cunning for imposing it on her free will to decide her fate.

Involuntarily she sighed.

‘There is a train at three,’ said De Craye, with splendid promptitude.

‘Yes, and one at five. We dine with Mrs Mountstuart to-night. And I have a passion for solitude! I think I was never intended for obligations. The moment I am bound I begin to brood on freedom.’

‘Ladies who say that, Miss Middleton…!’

‘What of them?’

‘They’re feeling too much alone.’

She could not combat the remark: by her self-assurance that she had the principle of faithfulness, she acknowledged to herself the truth of it: – there is no freedom for the weak. Vernon had said that once. She tried to resist the weight of it, and her sheer inability precipitated her into a sense of pitiful dependence.

Half an hour earlier it would have been a perilous condition to be traversing in the society of a closely scanning reader of fair faces. Circumstances had changed. They were at the gates of the park.

‘Shall I leave you?’ said De Craye.

‘Why should you?’ she replied.

He bent to her gracefully.

The mild subservience flattered Clara’s languor. He had not compelled her to be watchful on her guard, and she was unaware that he passed it when she acquiesced to his observation, ‘An anticipatory story is a trap to the teller.’

‘It is,’ she said. She had been thinking as much.

He threw up his head to consult the brain comically with a dozen little blinks.

‘No, you are right, Miss Middleton, inventing beforehand never prospers: ’tis a way to trip our own cleverness. Truth and mother-wit are the best counsellors: and as you are the former, I’ll try to act up to the character you assign me.’

Some tangle, more prospective than present, seemed to be about her as she reflected. But her intention being to speak to Willoughby without subterfuge, she was grateful to her companion for not tempting her to swerve. No one could doubt his talent for elegant fibbing, and she was in the humour both to admire and adopt the art, so she was glad to be rescued from herself. How mother-wit was to second truth she did not inquire, and as she did not happen to be thinking of Crossjay, she was not troubled by having to consider how truth and his tale of the morning would be likely to harmonize.

Driving down the park, she had full occupation in questioning whether her return would be pleasing to Vernon, who was the virtual cause of it, though he had done so little to promote it: so little that she really doubted his pleasure in seeing her return.

CHAPTER 29

In Which the Sensitiveness of Sir Willoughby Is Explained: and He Receives Much Instruction

THE Hall-clock over the stables was then striking twelve. It was the hour for her flight to be made known, and Clara sat in a turmoil of dim apprehension that prepared her nervous frame for a painful blush on her being asked by Colonel De Craye whether she had set her watch correctly. He must, she understood, have seen through her at the breakfast-table: and was she not cruelly indebted to him for her evasion of Willoughby? Such perspicacity of vision distressed and frightened her; at the same time she was obliged to acknowledge that he had not presumed on it. Her dignity was in no way the worse for him. But it had been at a man’s mercy, and there was the affliction.

She jumped from the fly as if she were leaving danger behind. She could at the moment have greeted Willoughby with a conventionally friendly smile. The doors were thrown open and young Crossjay flew out to her. He hung and danced on her hand, pressed the hand to his mouth, hardly believing that he saw and touched her, and in a lingo of dashes and asterisks related how Sir Willoughby had found him under the boathouse eaves and pumped him, and had been sent off to Hoppner’s farm, where there was a sick child, and on along the road to a labourer’s cottage: ‘For I said you’re so kind to poor people, Miss Middleton; that’s true, now that *is* true. And I said you wouldn’t have me with you for fear of contagion!’ This was what she had feared.

‘Every crack and bang in a boy’s vocabulary,’ remarked the colonel, listening to him after he had paid Flitch.

The latter touched his hat till he had drawn attention to himself, when he exclaimed, with rosy melancholy: ‘Ah! my lady, ah! colonel, if ever I lives to drink some of the old port wine in the old Hall at

Christmastide!' Their healths would on that occasion be drunk, it was implied. He threw up his eyes at the windows, humped his body and drove away.

'Then Mr Whitford has not come back?' said Clara to Crossjay.

'No, Miss Middleton. Sir Willoughby has, and he's upstairs in his room dressing.'

'Have you seen Barclay?'

'She has just gone into the laboratory. I told her Sir Willoughby wasn't there.'

'Tell me, Crossjay, had she a letter?'

'She had something.'

'Run: say I am here; I want the letter, it is mine.'

Crossjay sprang away and plunged into the arms of Sir Willoughby.

'One has to catch the fellow like a foot-ball,' exclaimed the injured gentleman, doubled across the boy and holding him fast, that he might have an object to trifle with, to give himself countenance: he needed it. 'Clara, you have not been exposed to the weather?'

'Hardly at all.'

'I rejoice. You found shelter?'

'Yes.'

'In one of the cottages?'

'Not in a cottage; but I was perfectly sheltered. Colonel De Craye passed a fly before he met me…'

'Flitch again!' ejaculated the colonel.

'Yes, you have luck, you have luck,' Willoughby addressed him, still clutching Crossjay and treating his tugs to get loose as an invitation to caresses. But the foil barely concealed his livid perturbation.

'Stay by me, sir,' he said at last sharply to Crossjay, and Clara touched the boy's shoulder in admonishment of him.

She turned to the colonel as they stepped into the hall: 'I have not thanked you, Colonel De Craye.' She dropped her voice to its lowest: 'A letter in my handwriting in the laboratory.'

Crossjay cried aloud with pain.

'I have you!' Willoughby rallied him with a laugh not unlike the squeak of his victim.

'You squeeze awfully hard, sir.'

'Why, you milksop!'

'Am I! But I want to get a book.'

'Where is the book?'

'In the laboratory.'

Colonel De Craye, sauntering by the laboratory door, sung out: 'I'll fetch you your book. What is it? EARLY NAVIGATORS? INFANT HYMNS? I think my cigar-case is in here.'

'Barclay speaks of a letter for me,' Willoughby said to Clara, 'marked to be delivered to me at noon!'

'In case of my not being back earlier; it was written to avert anxiety,' she replied.

'You are very good.'

'Oh, good! Call me anything but good. Here are the ladies. Dear ladies!' Clara swam to meet them as they issued from a morning-room into the hall, and interjections reigned for a couple of minutes.

Willoughby relinquished his grasp of Crossjay, who darted instantaneously at an angle to the laboratory, whither he followed, and he encountered De Craye coming out, but passed him in silence.

Crossjay was rangeing and peering all over the room. Willoughby went –to his desk and the battery-table and the mantelpiece. He found no letter. Barclay had undoubtedly informed him that she had left a letter for him in the laboratory, by order of her mistress after breakfast.

He hurried out and ran upstairs in time to see De Craye and Barclay breaking a conference.

He beckoned to her. The maid lengthened her upper lip and beat her dress down smooth: signs of the apprehension of a crisis and of the getting ready for action.

'My mistress's bell has just rung, Sir Willoughby.'

'You had a letter for me.'

'I said…'

'You said when I met you at the foot of the stairs that you had left a letter for me in the laboratory.'

'It is lying on my mistress's toilet-table.'

‘Get it.’

Barclay swept round with another of her demure grimaces. It was apparently necessary with her that she should talk to herself in this public manner.

Willoughby waited for her; but there was no reappearance of the maid.

Struck by the ridicule of his posture of expectation, and of his whole behaviour, he went to his bedroom suite, shut himself in, and paced the chambers, amazed at the creature he had become. Agitated like the commonest of wretches, destitute of self-control, not able to preserve a decent mask, he, accustomed to inflict these emotions and tremours upon others, was at once the puppet and dupe of an intriguing girl. His very stature seemed lessened. The glass did not say so, but the shrunken heart within him did, and wailfully too. Her compunction – ‘Call me anything but good’ – coming after her return to the Hall beside De Craye, and after the visible passage of a secret between them in his presence, was a confession: it blew at him with the fury of a furnace-blast in his face. Egoist agony wrung the outcry from him that dupery is a more blessed condition. He desired to be deceived.

He could desire such a thing only in a temporary transport; for above all he desired that no one should know of his being deceived; and were he a dupe the deceiver would know it, and her accomplice would know it, and the world would soon know of it: that world against whose tongue he stood defenceless. Within the shadow of his presence he compressed opinion, as a strong frost binds the springs of earth, but beyond it his shivering sensitiveness ran about in dread of a stripping in a wintry atmosphere. This was the ground of his hatred of the world: it was an appalling fear on behalf of his naked eidolon, the tender infant Self swaddled in his name before the world, for which he felt as the most highly civilized of men alone can feel, and which it was impossible for him to stretch out hands to protect. There the poor little loveable creature ran for any mouth to blow on; and frost-nipped and bruised, it cried to him, and he was of no avail! Must we not detest a world that so treats us? We loathe it the more, by the measure of our contempt for them, when we have made the people within the shadow-circle of our person slavish.

And he had been once a young prince in popularity: the world had been his possession. Clara’s treatment of him was a robbery of land and subjects. His grander dream had been a marriage with a lady of so glowing a fame for beauty and attachment to her lord that the world perforce must take her for witness to merits which would silence detraction and almost, not quite (it was undesireable), extinguish envy. But for the nature of women his dream would have been realized. He could not bring himself to denounce Fortune. It had cost him a grievous pang to tell Horace De Craye he was lucky; he had been educated in the belief that Fortune specially prized and cherished little Willoughby: hence of necessity his maledictions fell upon women, or he would have forfeited the last blanket of a dream warm as poets revel in.

But if Clara deceived him, he inspired her with timidity. There was matter in that to make him wish to be deceived. She had not looked him much in the face: she had not crossed his eyes: she had looked deliberately downward, keeping her head up, to preserve an exterior pride. The attitude had its bewitchingness: the girl’s physical pride of stature scorning to bend under a load of conscious guilt, had a certain black-angel beauty for which he felt a hugging hatred: and according to his policy when these fits of amorous meditation seized him, he burst from the present one in the mood of his more favourable conception of Clara, and sought her out.

The quality of the mood of hugging hatred is, that if you are disallowed the hug, you do not hate the fiercer.

Contrariwise the prescription of a decorous distance of two feet ten inches, which is by measurement the delimitation exacted of a rightly respectful deportment, has this miraculous effect on the great creature man, or often it has: that his peculiar hatred returns to the reluctant admiration begetting it, and his passion for the hug falls prostrate as one of the Faithful before the shrine; he is reduced to worship by fasting.

(For these mysteries, consult the sublime chapter in the GREAT BOOK, the Seventy-first on LOVE, wherein nothing is written, but the Reader receives a Lanthorn, a Powder-cask, and a Pick-axe, and therewith pursues his yellow-dusking path across the rubble of preceding excavators in the solitary quarry: a yet more instructive passage than the overscrawled Seventieth, or French Section, whence the chapter opens, and where hitherto the polite world has halted.)

The hurry of the hero is on us, we have no time to spare for mining works: he hurried to catch her alone, to wreak his tortures on her in a bitter semblance of bodily worship, and satiated, then comfortably to spurn. He found her protected by Barclay on the stairs.

‘That letter for me?’ he said.

‘I think I told you, Willoughby, there was a letter I left with Barclay to reassure you in case of my not

returning early,' said Clara. 'It was unnecessary for her to deliver it.'

'Indeed? But any letter, any writing of yours, and from you to me! You have it still?'

'No, I have destroyed it.'

'That was wrong,'

'It could not have given you pleasure.'

'My dear Clara, one line from you!'

'There were but three.'

Barclay stood sucking her lips. A maid in the secrets of her mistress is a purchaseable maid, for if she will take a bribe with her right hand she will with her left; all that has to be calculated is the nature and amount of the bribe: such was the speculation indulged by Sir Willoughby, and he shrank from the thought and declined to know more than that he was on a volcanic hillside where a thin crust quaked over lava. This was a new condition with him, representing Clara's gain in their combat. Clara did not fear his questioning so much as he feared her candour.

Mutually timid, they were of course formally polite, and no plain speaking could have told one another more distinctly that each was defensive. Clara stood pledged to the fib; packed, sealed and posted; and he had only to ask to have it, supposing that he asked with a voice not exactly peremptory.

She said in her heart, 'It is your fault: you are relentless and you would ruin Crossjay to punish him for devoting himself to me, like the poor thoughtless boy he is! and so I am bound in honour to do my utmost for him.'

The reciprocal devotedness, moreover, served two purposes: it preserved her from brooding on the humiliation of her lame flight, and flutter back, and it quieted her mind in regard to the precipitate intimacy of her relations with Colonel De Craye. Willoughby's boast of his implacable character was to blame. She was at war with him, and she was compelled to put the case in that light. Crossjay must be shielded from one who could not spare an offender, so Colonel De Craye quite naturally was called on for his help, and the colonel's dexterous aid appeared to her more admirable than alarming.

Nevertheless, she would not have answered a direct question falsely. She was for the fib, but not the lie; at a word she could be disdainful of subterfuges. Her look said that. Willoughby perceived it. She had written him a letter of three lines: 'There were but three': and she had destroyed the letter. Something perchance was repented by her? Then she had done him an injury! Between his wrath at the suspicion of an injury, and the prudence enjoined by his abject coveting of her, he consented to be fooled for the sake of vengeance, and something besides.

'Well! here you are, safe; I have you!' said he, with courtly exultation: 'and that is better than your handwriting. I have been all over the country after you.'

'Why did you? We are not in a barbarous land,' said Clara.

'Crossjay talks of your visiting a sick child, my love: – you have changed your dress?'

'You see.'

'The boy declared you were going to that farm of Hoppner's, and some cottage. I met at my gates a tramping vagabond who swore to seeing you and the boy in a totally contrary direction.'

'Did you give him money?'

'I fancy so.'

'Then he was paid for having seen me.'

Willoughby tossed his head: it might be as she suggested; beggars are liars.

'But who sheltered you, my dear Clara? You had not been heard of at Hoppner's.'

'The people have been indemnified for their pains. To pay them more would be to spoil them. You disperse money too liberally. There was no fever in the place. Who could have anticipated such a downpour! I want to consult Miss Dale on the important theme of a dress I think of wearing at Mrs Mountstuart's to-night.'

'Do. She is unerring.'

'She has excellent taste.'

'She dresses very simply herself.'

'But it becomes her. She is one of the few women whom I feel I could not improve with a touch.'

'She has judgement.'

He reflected and repeated his encomium.

The shadow of a dimple in Clara's cheek awakened him to the idea that she had struck him somewhere:

and certainly he would never again be able to put up the fiction of her jealousy of Laetitia. What, then, could be this girl's motive for praying to be released? The interrogation humbled him: he fled from the answer.

Willoughby went in search of De Craye. That sprightly intriguer had no intention to let himself be caught solus. He was undiscoverable until the assembly sounded, when Clara dropped a public word or two, and he spoke in perfect harmony with her. After that, he gave his company to Willoughby for an hour at billiards, and was well beaten.

The announcement of a visit of Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson took the gentlemen to the drawing-room, rather suspecting that something stood in the way of her dinner-party. As it happened, she was lamenting only the loss of one of the jewels of the party: to wit, the great Professor Crooklyn, invited to meet Dr Middleton at her table; and she related how she had driven to the station by appointment, the professor being notoriously a bother-headed traveller: as was shown by the fact that he had missed his train in town, for he had not arrived; nothing had been seen of him. She cited Vernon Whitford for her authority that the train had been inspected, and the platform scoured to find the professor.

'And so,' said she, 'I drove home your Green Man to dry him; he was wet through and chattering; the man was exactly like a skeleton wrapped in a sponge, and if he escapes a cold he must be as invulnerable as he boasts himself. These athletes are terrible boasters.'

'They climb their Alps to crow,' said Clara, excited by her apprehension that Mrs Mountstuart would speak of having seen the colonel near the station.

There was a laugh, and Colonel De Craye laughed loudly as it flashed through him that a quick-witted impressionable girl like Miss Middleton must, before his arrival at the Hall, have speculated on such obdurate clay as Vernon Whitford was, with humourous despair at his uselessness to her. Glancing round, he saw Vernon standing fixed in a stare at the young lady.

'You heard that, Whitford?' he said, and Clara's face betokening an extremer contrition than he thought was demanded, the colonel rallied the Alpine climber for striving to be the tallest of them – Signor Excelsior! – and described these conquerors of mountains pancaked on the rocks in desperate embraces, bleached here, burned there, barked all over, all to be able to say they had been up 'so high' – had conquered another mountain! He was extravagantly funny and self-satisfied: a conqueror of the sex having such different rewards of enterprise.

Vernon recovered in time to accept the absurdities heaped on him.

'Climbing peaks won't compare with hunting a wriggler,' said he.

His allusion to the incessant pursuit of young Crossjay to pin him to lessons was appreciated.

Clara felt the thread of the look he cast from herself to Colonel De Craye. She was helpless, if he chose to misjudge her. Colonel De Craye did not!

Crossjay had the misfortune to enter the drawing-room while Mrs Mountstuart was compassionating Vernon for his ducking in pursuit of the wriggler; which De Craye likened to 'going through the river after his eel:' and immediately there was a cross-questioning of the boy between De Craye and Willoughby on the subject of his latest truancy, each gentleman trying to run him down in a palpable fib. They were succeeding brilliantly when Vernon put a stop to it by marching him off to hard labour. Mrs Mountstuart was led away to inspect the beautiful porcelain service, the present of Lady Busshe. 'Porcelain again!' she said to Willoughby, and would have signalled to the 'dainty rogue' to come with them, had not Clara been leaning over to Laetitia, talking to her in an attitude too graceful to be disturbed. She called his attention to it, slightly wondering at his impatience. She departed to meet an afternoon train on the chance that it would land the professor. 'But tell Dr Middleton,' said she, 'I fear I shall have no one worthy of him! And,' she added to Willoughby, as she walked out to her carriage, 'I shall expect you to do the great-gunnery talk at table.'

'Miss Dale keeps it up with him best,' said Willoughby.

'She does everything best! But my dinner-table is involved, and I cannot count on a young woman to talk across it. I would hire a lion of a menagerie, if one were handy, rather than have a famous scholar at my table, unsupported by another famous scholar. Doctor Middleton would ride down a duke when the wine is in him. He will terrify my poor flock. The truth is, we can't leaven him: I foresee undigested lumps of conversation, unless you devote yourself.'

'I will devote myself,' said Willoughby.

'I can calculate on Colonel De Craye and our porcelain beauty for any quantity of sparkles, if you promise that. They play well together. You are not to be one of the gods to-night, but a kind of Jupiter's cup-bearer; – Juno's, if you like; and Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, and all your admirers shall know subsequently

what you have done. You see my alarm. I certainly did not rank Professor Crooklyn among the possibly faithless, or I never would have ventured on Doctor Middleton at my table. My dinner-parties have hitherto been all successes. Naturally I feel the greater anxiety about this one. For a single failure is all the more conspicuous. The exception is everlastingly cited! It is not so much what people say, but my own sentiments. I hate to fail. However, if you are true, we may do.'

'Whenever the great gun goes off I will fall on my face, madam!'

'Something of that sort,' said the dame, smiling, and leaving him to reflect on the egoism of women. For the sake of her dinner-party he was to be a cipher in attendance on Dr Middleton, and Clara and De Craye were to be encouraged in sparkling together! And it happened that he particularly wished to shine. The admiration of his county made him believe he had a flavour in general society that was not yet distinguished by his bride, and he was to relinquish his opportunity in order to please Mrs Mountstuart! Had she been in the pay of his rival, she could not have stipulated for more.

He remembered young Crossjay's instant quietude, after struggling in his grasp, when Clara laid her hand on the boy: and from that infinitesimal circumstance he deduced the boy's perception of a differing between himself and his bride, and a transfer of Crossjay's allegiance from him to her. She shone; she had the gift of female beauty; the boy was attracted to it. That boy must be made to feel his treason. But the point of the cogitation was, that similarly were Clara to see her affianced shining, as shine he could when lighted up by admirers, there was the probability that the sensation of her littleness would animate her to take aim at him once more. And then was the time for her chastisement.

A visit to Dr Middleton in the library satisfied him that she had not been renewing her entreaties to leave Patterne. No, the miserable coquette had now her pastime, and was content to stay. Deceit was in the air: he heard the sound of the shuttle of deceit without seeing it; but, on the whole, mindful of what he had dreaded during the hours of her absence, he was rather flattered, witheringly flattered. What was it that he had dreaded? Nothing less than news of her running away. Indeed a silly fancy, a lover's fancy! yet it had led him so far as to suspect, after parting with De Craye in the rain, that his friend and his bride were in collusion, and that he should not see them again. He had actually shouted on the rainy road the theatric call 'Fooled!' – one of the stage-cries which are cries of nature! particularly the cry of nature with men who have driven other men to the cry.

Constantia Durham had taught him to believe women capable of explosions of treason at half a minute's notice. And strangely, to prove that women are all of a pack, she had worn exactly the same placidity of countenance just before she fled, as Clara yesterday and to-day; no nervousness, no flushes, no twitches of the brows, but smoothness, ease of manner – an elegant sisterliness, one might almost say: as if the creature had found a midway and borderline to walk on between cruelty and kindness, and between repulsion and attraction; so that up to the verge of her breath she did forcefully attract, repelling at one foot's length with her armour of chill serenity. Not with any disdain, with no passion: such a line as she herself pursued she indicated to him on a neighbouring parallel. The passion in her was like a place of waves evaporated to a crust of salt. Clara's resemblance to Constantia in this instance was ominous. For him whose tragic privilege it had been to fold each of them in his arms, and weigh on their eyelids, and see the dissolving mist-deeps in their eyes,

it was horrible. Once more the comparison overcame him. Constantia he could condemn for revealing too much to his manly sight: she had met him almost half-way: well, that was complimentary and sanguine: but her frankness was a baldness often rendering it doubtful which of the two, lady or gentleman, was the object of the chase – an extreme perplexity to his manly soul. Now Clara's inner spirit was shyer, shy as a doe down those rose-tinged abysses; she allured both the lover and the hunter; forests of heavenliness were in her flitting eyes. Here the difference of these fair women made his present fate an intolerable anguish. For if Constantia was like certain of the ladies whom he had rendered unhappy, triumphed over, as it is queerly called, Clara was not. Her individuality as a woman was a thing he had to bow to. It was impossible to roll her up in the sex and bestow a kick on the travelling bundle. Hence he loved her, though she hurt

him. Hence his wretchedness, and but for the hearty sincerity of his faith in the Self he loved likewise and more, he would have been hangdog abject.

As for De Craye, Willoughby recollected his own exploits too proudly to put his trust in a man. That fatal conjunction of temper and policy had utterly thrown him off his guard, or he would not have trusted the fellow even in the first hour of his acquaintance with Clara. But he had wished her to be amused while he wove his plans to retain her at the Hall: – partly imagining that she would weary of his neglect: vile delusion! In truth he should have given festivities, he should have been the sun of a circle, and have revealed himself to her in his more dazzling form. He went near to calling himself foolish after the tremendous reverberation of 'Fooled!' had ceased to shake him.

How behave? It slapped the poor gentleman's pride in the face to ask. A private talk with her would rouse her to renew her supplications. He saw them flickering behind the girl's transparent calmness. That calmness really drew its dead ivory hue from the suppression of them: something as much he guessed; and he was not sure either of his temper or his policy if he should hear her repeat her profane request.

An impulse to address himself to Vernon and discourse with him jocularly on the childish whim of a young lady, moved perhaps by some whiff of jealousy, to shun the yoke, was checked. He had always taken so superior a pose with Vernon that he could not abandon it for a moment: on such a subject too! Besides, Vernon was one of your men who entertain the ideas about women of fellows that have never conquered one: or only one, we will say in his case, knowing his secret history; and that one no flag to boast of. Densely ignorant of the sex, his nincompoopish idealizations, at other times preposterous, would now be annoying. He would probably presume on Clara's inconceivable lapse of dignity to read his master a lecture: he was quite equal to a philippic upon woman's rights. This man had not been afraid to say that he talked common sense to women. He was an example of the consequence!

Another result was that Vernon did not talk sense to men. Willoughby's wrath at Clara's exposure of him to his cousin dismissed the proposal of a colloquy so likely to sting his temper, and so certain to diminish his loftiness. Unwilling to speak to anybody, he was isolated, yet consciously begirt by the mysterious action going on all over the house, from Clara and De Craye to Laetitia and young Crossjay, down to Barclay the maid. His blind sensitiveness felt as we may suppose a spider to feel when plucked from his own web and set in the centre of another's. Laetitia looked her share in the mystery. A burden was on her eyelashes. How she could have come to any suspicion of the circumstances, he was unable to imagine. Her intense personal sympathy, it might be; he thought so with some gentle pity for her – of the paternal pat-back order of pity. She adored him, by decree of Venus;

and the Goddess had not decreed that he should find consolation in adoring her. Nor could the temptings of prudent counsel in his head induce him to run the risk of such a total turnover as the incurring of Laetitia's pity of himself by confiding in her. He checked that impulse also, and more sovereignly. For him to be pitied by Laetitia seemed an upsetting of the scheme of Providence. Providence, otherwise the discriminating dispensation of the good things of life, had made him the beacon, her the bird: she was really the last person to whom he could unbosom. The idea of his being in a position that suggested his doing so, thrilled him with fits of rage; and it appalled him. There appeared to be another Power. The same which had humiliated him once was menacing him anew. For it could not be Providence, whose favourite he had ever been. We must have a couple of Powers to account for discomfort when Egoism is the kernel of our religion. Benevolence had singled him for uncommon benefits: malignancy was at work to rob him of them. And you think well of the world, do you!

Of necessity he associated Clara with the darker Power pointing the knife at the quick of his pride. Still, he would have raised her weeping: he would have stanched her wounds bleeding: he had an infinite thirst for her misery, that he might ease his heart of its charitable love. Or let her commit herself, and be cast off. Only she must commit herself glaringly, and be cast off by the world as well. Contemplating her in the form of a discarded weed, he had a catch of the breath: she was fair. He implored his Power that Horace De Craye might not be the man! Why any man? An illness, fever, fire, runaway horses, personal disfigurement, a laming, were sufficient. And then a formal and noble offer on his part to keep to the engagement with the unhappy wreck: yes, and to lead the limping thing to the altar, if she insisted. His imagination conceived it, and the world's applause besides.

Nausea, together with a sense of duty to his line, extinguished that loathsome prospect of a mate, though without obscuring his chivalrous devotion to his gentleman's word of honour, which remained in his mind to compliment him permanently.

On the whole, he could reasonably hope to subdue her to admiration. He drank a glass of champagne at his dressing; an unaccustomed act, but, as he remarked casually to his man Pollington, for whom the rest of the bottle was left, he had taken no horse-exercise that day.

Having to speak to Vernon on business, he went to the schoolroom, where he discovered Clara, beautiful in full evening attire, with her arm on young Crossjay's shoulder, and heard that the hard task-master had abjured Mrs Mountstuart's party, and had already excused himself, intending to keep Crossjay to the grindstone. Willoughby was for the boy, as usual, and more sparklingly than usual. Clara looked at him in some surprise. He rallied Vernon with great zest, quite silencing him when he said: 'I bear witness that the fellow was here at his regular hour for lessons, and were you?' He laid his hand on Crossjay, touching Clara's.

'You will remember what I told you, Crossjay,' said she, rising from the seat gracefully to escape the touch. 'It is my command.'

Crossjay frowned and puffed.

‘But only if I’m questioned,’ he said.

‘Certainly,’ she replied.

‘Then I question the rascal,’ said Willoughby, causing a start. ‘What, sir, is your opinion of Miss Middleton in her robe of state this evening?’

‘Now, the truth, Crossjay!’ Clara held up a finger; and the boy could see she was playing at archness, but for Willoughby it was earnest. ‘The truth is not likely to offend you or me either,’ he murmured to her.

‘I wish him never, never, on any excuse, to speak anything else.’

‘I always did think her a Beauty,’ Crossjay growled. He hated the having to say it.

‘There!’ exclaimed Sir Willoughby, and bent, extending an arm to her. ‘You have not suffered from the truth, my Clara!’

Her answer was: ‘I was thinking how he might suffer if he were taught to tell the reverse.’

‘Oh, for a fair lady!’

‘That is the worst of teaching, Willoughby.’

‘We’ll leave it to the fellow’s instinct; he has our blood in him. I could convince you, though, if I might cite circumstances. Yes! But yes! And yes again! The entire truth cannot invariably be told. I venture to say it should not.’

‘You would pardon it for the “fair lady”?’

‘Applaud, my love.’

He squeezed the hand within his arm, contemplating her.

She was arrayed in a voluminous robe of pale blue silk vapourous with trimmings of light gauze of the same hue, gaze de Chambéry, matching her fair hair and clear skin for the complete overthrow of less inflammable men than Willoughby.

‘Clara!’ sighed he.

‘If so, it would really be generous,’ she said, ‘though the teaching is bad.’

‘I fancy I can be generous.’

‘Do we ever know?’

He turned his head to Vernon, issuing brief succinct instructions for letters to be written, and drew her into the hall, saying: ‘Know? There are people who do *not* know themselves and as they are the majority they manufacture the axioms. And it is assumed that we have to swallow them. I may observe that I think I know. I decline to be engulphed in those majorities. “Among them, but not of them.” I know this, that my aim in life is to be generous.’

‘Is it not an impulse or disposition rather than an aim?’

‘So much I know,’ pursued Willoughby, refusing to be tripped. But she rang discordantly in his ear. His ‘fancy that he could be generous’ and his ‘aim at being generous’ had met with no response. ‘I have given proofs,’ he said, briefly, to drop a subject upon which he was not permitted to dilate; and he murmured, ‘People acquainted with me…!’ She was asked if she expected him to boast of generous deeds. ‘From childhood!’ she heard him mutter; and she said to herself, ‘Release me, and you shall be everything!’

The unhappy gentleman ached as he talked: for with men and with hosts of women to whom he was indifferent, never did he converse in this shambling, third-rate, sheepish manner, devoid of all highness of tone and the proper precision of an authority. He was unable to fathom the cause of it, but Clara imposed it on him, and only in anger could he throw it off. The temptation to an outburst that would flatter him with the sound of his authoritative voice had to be resisted on a night when he must be composed if he intended to shine, so he merely mentioned Lady Busshe’s present, to gratify spleen by preparing the ground for dissension, and prudently acquiesced in her anticipated slipperiness. She would rather not look at it now, she said.

‘Not now; very well,’ said he.

His immediate deference made her regretful. ‘There is hardly time, Willoughby.’

‘My dear, we shall have to express our thanks to her.’

‘I cannot.’

His arm contracted sharply. He was obliged to be silent.

Dr Middleton, Laetitia, and the ladies Eleanor and Isabel joining them in the hall, found two figures linked together in a shadowy indication of halves that have fallen apart and hang on the last thread of junction. Willoughby retained her hand on his arm; he held to it as the symbol of their alliance, and

oppressed the girl's nerves by contact, with a frame labouring for breath. De Craye looked on them from overhead. The carriages were at the door, and Willoughby said, 'Where's Horace? I suppose he's taking a final shot at his Book of Anecdotes and neat collection of Irishisms.'

'No,' replied the colonel, descending. 'That's a spring works of itself and has discovered the secret of continuous motion, more's the pity! – unless you'll be pleased to make it of use to Science.'

He gave a laugh of good-humour.

'Your laughter, Horace, is a capital comment on your wit.'

Willoughby said it with the air of one who has flicked a whip.

''Tis a genial advertisement of a vacancy,' said De Craye.

'Precisely: three parts auctioneer to one for the property.'

'Oh, if you have a musical quack, score it a point in his favour, Willoughby, though you don't swallow his drug.'

'If he means to be musical, let him keep time.'

'Am I late?' said De Craye to the ladies, proving himself an adept in the art of being gracefully vanquished, and so winning tender hearts.

Willoughby had refreshed himself. At the back of his mind there was a suspicion that his adversary would not have yielded so flatly without an assurance of practically triumphing, secretly getting the better of him; and it filled him with venom for a further bout at the next opportunity: but as he had been sarcastic and mordant, he had shown Clara what he could do in a way of speaking different from the lamentable cooing stuff, gasps and feeble protestations to which, he knew not how, she reduced him. Sharing the opinion of his race, that blunt personalities, or the pugilistic form, administered directly on the salient features, are exhibitions of mastery in such encounters, he felt strong and solid, eager for the successes of the evening. De Craye was in the first carriage as escort to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. Willoughby, with Clara, Laetitia, and Dr Middleton, followed, all silent, for the Rev. Doctor was ostensibly pondering; and Willoughby was damped a little when he unlocked his mouth to say:

'And yet I have not observed that Colonel de Craye is anything of a Celtiberian Egnatius meriting fustigation for an untimely display of well-whitened teeth, sir: "quicquid est, ubicunque est, quodcunque agit, renidet:"[26] – ha? a morbus neither charming nor urbane to the general eye, however consolatory to the actor. But this gentleman does not offend so, or I am so strangely prepossessed in his favour as to be an incompetent witness.'

Dr Middleton's persistent ha? eh? upon an honest frown of inquiry plucked an answer out of Willoughby that was meant to be humourously scornful, and soon became apologetic under the Doctor's interrogatively grasping gaze.

'These Irishmen,' Willoughby said, 'will play the professional jester as if it were an office they were born to. We must play critic now and then, otherwise we should have them deluging us with their Joe Millerisms.'

'With their O'Millerisms you would say, perhaps?'

Willoughby did his duty to the joke, but the Rev. Doctor, though he wore the paternal smile of a man that has begotten hilarity, was not perfectly propitiated, and pursued: 'Nor to my apprehension is "the man's laugh the comment on his wit" unchallengeably new: instances of cousinship germane to the phrase will recur to you. But it has to be noted that it was a phrase of assault; it was ostentatiously battery; and I would venture to remind you, friend, that among the elect, considering that it is as fatally facile to spring the laugh upon a man as to deprive him of his life, considering that we have only to condescend to the weapon, and that the more popular necessarily the more murderous that weapon is, – among the elect, to which it is your distinction to aspire to belong, the rule holds to abstain from any employment of the obvious, the percoct, and likewise, for your own sake, from the epitonic, the overstrained; for if the former, by readily assimilating with the understandings of your audience, are empowered to commit assassination on your victim, the latter come under the charge of unseemliness, inasmuch as they are a description of public suicide. Assuming, then, manslaughter to be your pastime, and hari-kari not to be your bent, the phrase, to escape criminality, must rise in you as you would have it fall on him, ex improviso. Am I right?'

'I am in the habit of thinking it impossible, sir, that you can be in error,' said Willoughby.

Dr Middleton left it the more emphatic by saying nothing further.

Both his daughter and Miss Dale, who had disapproved the waspish snap at Colonel De Craye, were in wonderment of the art of speech which could so soothingly inform a gentleman that his behaviour had not been gentlemanly.

Willoughby was damped by what he comprehended of it for a few minutes. In proportion as he realized an evening with his ancient admirers he was restored, and he began to marvel greatly at his folly in not giving banquets and Balls, instead of making a solitude about himself and his bride. For solitude, thought he, is good for the man, the man being a creature consumed by passion; woman's love, on the contrary, will only be nourished by the reflex light she catches of you in the eyes of others, she having no passion of her own, but simply an instinct driving her to attach herself to whatsoever is most largely admired, most shining. So thinking, he determined to change his course of conduct, and he was happier. In the first gush of our wisdom drawn directly from experience there is a mental intoxication that cancels the old world and establishes a new one, not allowing us to ask whether it is too late.

CHAPTER 30

Treating of the Dinner-Party at Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's

VERNON and young Crossjay had tolerably steady work together for a couple of hours, varied by the arrival of a plate of meat on a tray for the master, and some interrogations put to him from time to time by the boy in reference to Miss Middleton. Crossjay made the discovery that if he abstained from alluding to Miss Middleton's beauty he might water his dusty path with her name nearly as much as he liked. Mention of her beauty incurred a reprimand. On the first occasion his master was wistful. 'Isn't she glorious!' Crossjay fancied he had started a sovereign receipt for blessed deviations. He tried it again, but paedagogue-thunder broke over his head.

'Yes, only I can't understand what she means, Mr Whitford,' he excused himself. 'First I was not to tell; I know I wasn't, because she said so; she quite as good as said so. Her last words were: "Mind, Crossjay, you know nothing about me", when I stuck to that beast of a tramp, who's a "walking moral", and gets money out of people by snuffling it.'

'Attend to your lesson, or you'll be one,' said Vernon.

'Yes, but, Mr Whitford, now I *am* to tell. I'm to answer straight out to every question.'

'Miss Middleton is anxious that you should be truthful.'

'Yes; but in the morning she told me not to tell.'

'She was in a hurry. She has it on her conscience that you may have misunderstood her, and she wishes you never to be guilty of an untruth, least of all on her account.'

Crossjay committed an unspoken resolution to the air in a violent sigh: 'Ah!' and said: 'If I were sure!'

'Do as she bids you, my boy.'

'But I don't know what it is she wants.'

'Hold to her last words to you.'

'So I do. If she told me to run till I dropped, on I'd go.'

'She told you to study your lessons; do that.'

Crossjay buckled to his book, invigorated by an imagination of his liege lady on the page.

After a studious interval, until the impression of his lady had subsided, he resumed: 'She's so funny. She's just like a girl, and then she's a lady, too. She's my idea of a princess. And Colonel De Craye! Wasn't he taught dancing! When he says something funny he ducks and seems to be setting to his partner. I should like to be as clever as her father. That is a clever man. I dare say Colonel De Craye will dance with her to-night. I wish I was there.'

'It's a dinner-party, not a dance,' Vernon forced himself to say, to dispel that ugly vision.

'Isn't it, sir? I thought they danced after dinner-parties, Mr Whitford, have you ever seen her run?'

Vernon pointed him to his task.

They were silent for a lengthened period.

'But does Miss Middleton mean me to speak out if Sir Willoughby asks me?' said Crossjay.

'Certainly. You needn't make much of it. All's plain and simple.'

'But I'm positive, Mr Whitford, he wasn't to hear of her going to the post-office with me before breakfast. And how did Colonel De Craye find her and bring her back, with that old Flitch? He's a man and can go

where he pleases, and I'd have found her, too, give me the chance. You know, I'm fond of Miss Dale, but she – I'm very fond of her – but you can't think she's a girl as well. And about Miss Dale, when she says a thing, there it is, clear. But Miss Middleton has a lot of meanings. Never mind; I go by what's inside, and I'm pretty sure to please her.'

'Take your chin off your hand and your elbow off the book, and fix yourself,' said Vernon, wrestling with the seduction of Crossjay's idolatry, for Miss Middleton's appearance had been preternaturally sweet on her departure, and the next pleasure to seeing her was hearing of her from the lips of this passionate young poet.

'Remember that you please her by speaking truth,' Vernon added, and laid himself open to questions upon the truth, by which he learnt, with a perplexed sense of envy and sympathy, that the boy's idea of truth strongly approximated to his conception of what should be agreeable to Miss Middleton.

He was lonely, bereft of the bard, when he had tucked Crossjay up in his bed and left him. Books he could not read; thoughts were disturbing. A seat in the library and a stupid stare helped to pass the hours, and but for the spot of sadness moving meditation in spite of his effort to stun himself, he would have borne a happy resemblance to an idiot in the sun. He had verily no command of his reason. She was too beautiful! Whatever she did was best. That was the refrain of the fountain-song in him; the burden being her whims, variations, inconsistencies, wiles; her tremblings between good and naughty, that might be stamped to noble or to terrible; her sincereness, her duplicity, her courage, cowardice, possibilities for heroism and for treachery. By dint of dwelling on the theme, he magnified the young lady to extraordinary stature. And he had sense enough to own that her character was yet liquid in the mould, and that she was a creature of only naturally youthful wildness provoked to freakishness by the ordeal of a situation shrewd as any that can happen to her sex in civilized life. But he was compelled to think of her extravagantly, and he leaned a little to the discrediting of her, because her actual image unmanned him and was unbearable; and to say at the end of it: 'She is too beautiful! whatever she does is best,' smoothed away the wrong he did her. Had it been in his power he would have thought of her in the abstract – the stage contiguous to that which he adopted: but the attempt was luckless; the Stagyrite[27] would have failed in it. What philosopher could have set down that face of sun and breeze and nymph in shadow as a point in a problem?

The library door was opened at midnight by Miss Dale. She closed it quietly. 'You are not working, Mr Whitford? I fancied you would wish to hear of the evening. Professor Crooklyn arrived after all! Mrs Mountstuart is bewildered: she says she expected you, and that you did not excuse yourself to her, and she cannot comprehend, et caetera. That is to say, she chooses bewilderment to indulge in the exclamatory. She must be very much annoyed. The professor did come by the train she drove to meet!'

'I thought it probable,' said Vernon.

'He had to remain a couple of hours at the Railway Inn; no conveyance was to be found for him. He thinks he has caught a cold, and cannot stifle his fretfulness about it. He may be as learned as Doctor Middleton; he has not the same happy constitution. Nothing more unfortunate could have occurred; he spoilt the party. Mrs Mountstuart tried petting him, which drew attention to him, and put us all in his key for several awkward minutes, more than once. She lost her head; she was unlike herself. I may be presumptuous in criticizing her, but should not the president of a dinner-table treat it like a battle-field, and let the guest that sinks descend, and not allow the voice of a discordant, however illustrious, to rule it? Of course, it is when I see failures that I fancy I could manage so well: comparison is prudently reserved in the other cases. I am a daring critic, no doubt, because I know I shall never be tried by experiment. I have no ambition to be tried.'

She did not notice a smile of Vernon's, and continued: 'Mrs Mountstuart gave him the lead upon any subject he chose. I thought the professor never would have ceased talking of a young lady who had been at the inn before him drinking hot brandy and water with a gentleman!'

'How did he hear of that?' cried Vernon, roused by the malignity of the Fates.

'From the landlady, trying to comfort him. And a story of her lending shoes and stockings while those of the young lady were drying. He has the dreadful snappish humourous way of recounting which impresses it; the table took up the subject of this remarkable young lady, and whether she was a lady of the neighbourhood, and who she could be that went abroad on foot in heavy rain. It was painful to me; I knew enough to be sure of who she was.'

'Did she betray it?'

'No.'

'Did Willoughby look at her?'

'Without suspicion then.'

‘Then?’

‘Colonel De Craye was diverting us, and he was very amusing. Mrs Mountstuart told him afterward that he ought to be paid salvage for saving the wreck of her party. Sir Willoughby was a little too cynical; he talked well; what he said was good, but it was not good-humoured; he has not the reckless indifference of Colonel De Craye to uttering nonsense that amusement may come of it. And in the drawing-room he lost such gaiety as he had. I was close to Mrs Mountstuart when Professor Crooklyn approached her and spoke in my hearing of *that* gentleman and *that* young lady. They were, you could see by his nods, Colonel De Craye and Miss Middleton.’

‘And she at once mentioned it to Willoughby?’

‘Colonel De Craye gave her no chance, if she sought it. He courted her profusely. Behind his rattle he must have brains. It ran in all directions to entertain her and her circle.’

‘Willoughby knows nothing?’

‘I cannot judge. He stood with Mrs Mountstuart a minute as we were taking leave. She looked strange. I heard her say: “The rogue.” He laughed. She lifted her shoulders. He scarcely opened his mouth on the way home.’

‘The thing must run its course,’ Vernon said, with the philosophical air which is desperation rendered decorous. ‘Willoughby deserves it. A man of full growth ought to know that nothing on earth tempts Providence so much as the binding of a young woman against her will. Those two are mutually attracted: they’re both… They meet, and the mischief’s done: both are bright. He can persuade with a word. Another might discourse like an angel and it would be useless. I said everything I could think of, to no purpose. And so it is: there are those attractions! – just as, with her, Willoughby is the reverse, he repels. I’m in about the same predicament – or should be if she were plighted to me. That is, for the length of five minutes; about the space of time I should require for the formality of handing her back her freedom. How a sane man can imagine a girl like that…! But if she has changed she has changed! You can’t conciliate a withered affection. This detaining her, and tricking, and not listening, only increases her aversion; she learns the art in turn. Here she is, detained by fresh plots to keep Dr Middleton at the Hall. That’s true, is it not?’ He saw that it was. ‘No, she’s not to blame! She has told him her mind; he won’t listen. The question then is, whether she keeps to her word, or breaks it. It’s a dispute between a conventional idea of obligation and an injury to her nature. Which is the more dishonourable thing to do? Why, you and I see in a moment that her feelings guide her best. It’s one of the few cases in which nature may be consulted like an oracle.’

‘Is she so sure of her nature?’ said Miss Dale.

‘You may doubt it; I do not. I am surprised at her coming back. De Craye is a man of the world, and advised it, I suppose. He – well, I never had the persuasive tongue, and my failing doesn’t count for much.’

‘But the suddenness of the intimacy!’

‘The disaster is rather famous “at first sight”. He came in a fortunate hour… for him. A pigmy’s a giant if he can manage to arrive in season. The à propos puffs us to the heroic size. Did you not notice that there was danger, at their second or third glance? You counselled me to hang on here, where the amount of good I do in proportion to what I have to endure is microscopic.’

‘It was against your wishes, I know,’ said Laetitia, and when the words were out she feared that they were tentative. Her delicacy shrank from even seeming to sound him in relation to a situation so delicate as Miss Middleton’s.

The same sentiment guarded him from betraying himself, and he said: ‘Partly against. We both foresaw the possible – because, like most prophets, we knew a little more of circumstances enabling us to see the fatal. A pigmy would have served, but De Craye is a handsome, intelligent, pleasant fellow.’

‘Sir Willoughby’s friend!’

‘Well, in these affairs! A great deal must be charged on the goddess.’

‘That is really Pagan fatalism!’

‘Our modern word for it is Nature. Science condescends to speak of natural selection. Look at these! They are both graceful and winning and witty, bright to mind and eye, made for one another, as country people say. I can’t blame him. Besides, we don’t know that he’s guilty. We’re quite in the dark, except that we’re certain how it must end. If the chance should occur to you of giving Willoughby a word of counsel – it may – you might, without irritating him as my knowledge of his plight does, hint at your eyes being open. His insane dread of a detective world makes him artificially blind. As soon as he fancies himself seen, he sets to work spinning a web, and he discerns nothing else. It’s generally a clever kind of web; but if it’s a tangle to others it’s the same to him, and a veil as well. He is preparing the catastrophe, he forces the issue. Tell him of her extreme desire to depart. Treat her as mad, to soothe him. Otherwise one morning he will wake a

second time…! It is perfectly certain. And the second time it will be entirely his own fault. Inspire him with some philosophy.'

'I have none.'

'If I thought so, I would say you have better. There are two kinds of philosophy, mine and yours. Mine comes of coldness, yours of devotion.'

'He is unlikely to choose me for his confidante.'

Vernon meditated. 'One can never quite guess what he will do, from never knowing the heat of the centre in him which precipitates his actions: he has a great art of concealment. As to me, as you perceive, my views are too philosophical to let me be of use to any of them. I blame only the one who holds to the bond. The sooner I am gone! – in fact, I cannot stay on. So Dr Middleton and the Professor did not strike fire together?'

'Doctor Middleton was ready, and pursued him, but Professor Crooklyn insisted on shivering. His line of blank verse, "A Railway platform and a Railway inn!" became pathetic in repetition. He must have suffered.'

'Somebody has to!'

'Why the innocent?'

'He arrives à propos. But remember that Fridolin[28] sometimes contrives to escape and have the guilty scorched. The Professor would not have suffered if he had missed his train, as he appears to be in the habit of doing. Thus his unaccustomed good-fortune was the cause of his bad.'

'You saw him on the platform?'

'I am unacquainted with the professor. I had to get Mrs Mountstuart out of the way.'

'She says she described him to you. "Complexion of a sweetbread, consistency of a quenelle, grey, and like a Saint without his dish." '

'Her descriptions are strikingly accurate, but she forgot to sketch his back, and all that I saw was a narrow sloping back and a broad hat resting the brim on it. My report to her spoke of an old gentleman of dark complexion, as the only traveller on the platform. She has faith in the efficiency of her descriptive powers, and so she was willing to drive off immediately. The intention was a start to London. Colonel De Craye came up and effected in five minutes what I could not compass in thirty.'

'But you saw Colonel De Craye pass you?'

'My work was done; I should have been an intruder. Besides I was acting wet jacket with Mrs Mountstuart to get her to drive off fast, or she might have jumped out in search of her Professor herself.'

'She says you were lean as a fork, with the wind whistling through the prongs.'

'You see how easy it is to deceive one who is an artist in phrases. Avoid them, Miss Dale; they dazzle the penetration of the composer. That is why people of ability like Mrs Mountstuart see so little; they are so bent on describing brilliantly. However, she is kind and charitable at heart. I have been considering to-night that, to cut this knot as it is now, Miss Middleton might do worse than speak straight out to Mrs Mountstuart. No one else would have such influence with Willoughby. The simple fact of Mrs Mountstuart's knowing of it would be almost enough. But courage would be required for that. Good-night, Miss Dale.'

'Good-night, Mr Whitford. You pardon me for disturbing you?'

Vernon pressed her hand reassuringly. He had but to look at her and review her history to think his cousin Willoughby punished by just retribution. Indeed, for any maltreatment of the dear boy Love by man or by woman, coming under your cognizance, you, if you be of common soundness, shall behold the retributive blow struck in your time.

Miss Dale retired thinking how like she and Vernon were to one another in the toneless condition they had achieved through sorrow. He succeeded in masking himself from her, owing to her awe of the circumstances. She reproached herself for not having the same devotion to the cold idea of duty as he had; and though it provoked inquiry, she would not stop to ask why he had left Miss Middleton a prey to the sparkling colonel. It seemed a proof of the philosophy he preached.

As she was passing by young Crossjay's bedroom door a face appeared. Sir Willoughby slowly emerged and presented himself in his full length, beseeching her to banish alarm.

He said it in a hushed voice, with a face qualified to create sentiment.

'Are you tired? sleepy?' said he.

She protested that she was not: she intended to read for an hour.

He begged to have the hour dedicated to him. 'I shall be relieved by conversing with a friend.'

No subterfuge crossed her mind; she thought his midnight visit to the boy's bedside a pretty feature in him; she was full of pity, too; she yielded to the strange request, feeling that it did not become 'an old woman' to attach importance even to the public discovery of midnight interviews involving herself as one, and feeling also that she was being treated as an old friend in the form of a very old woman. Her mind was bent on arresting any recurrence to the project she had so frequently outlined in the tongue of innuendo, of which, because of her repeated tremblings under it, she thought him a master.

He conducted her along the corridor to the private sitting-room of the ladies Eleanor and Isabel.

'Deceit!' he said, while lighting the candles on the mantel-piece.

She was earnestly compassionate, and a word that could not relate to her personal destinies refreshed her by displacing her apprehensive antagonism and giving pity free play.

CHAPTER 31

Sir Willoughby Attempts and Achieves Pathos

BOTH were seated. Apparently he would have preferred to watch her dark downcast eyelashes in silence under sanction of his air of abstract meditation and the melancholy superinducing it. Blood-colour was in her cheeks; the party had inspirited her features. Might it be that lively company, an absence of economical solicitudes, and a flourishing home were all she required to make her bloom again? The supposition was not hazardous in presence of her heightened complexion.

She raised her eyes. He could not meet her look without speaking.

'Can *you* forgive deceit?'

'It would be to boast of more charity than I know myself to possess, were I to say that I can, Sir Willoughby. I hope I am able to forgive. I cannot tell. I should like to say yes.'

'Could you live with the deceiver?'

'No.'

'No. I could have given that answer for you. No semblance of union should be maintained between the deceiver and ourselves. Laetitia!'

'Sir Willoughby?'

'Have I no right to your name?'

'If it pleases you to…'

'I speak as my thoughts run, and they did not know a Miss Dale so well as a dear Laetitia: my truest friend! You have talked with Clara Middleton?'

'We had a conversation.'

Her brevity affrighted him. He flew off in a cloud.

'Reverting to that question of deceivers: is it not your opinion that to pardon, to condone, is to corrupt society by passing off as pure what is false? Do we not,' he wore the smile of haggard playfulness of a convalescent child the first day back to its toys, 'Laetitia, do we not impose a counterfeit on the currency?'

'Supposing it to be really deception.'

'Apart from my loathing of deception, of falseness in any shape, upon any grounds, I hold it an imperious duty to expose, punish, off with it. I take it to be one of the forms of noxiousness which a good citizen is bound to extirpate. I am not myself good citizen enough, I confess, for much more than passive abhorrence. I do not forgive: I am at heart serious and I cannot forgive: – there is no possible reconciliation, there can be only an ostensible truce, between the two hostile powers dividing this world.'

She glanced at him quickly.

'Good and evil!' he said.

Her face expressed a surprise relapsing on the heart.

He spelt the puckers of her forehead to mean that she feared he might be speaking unchristianly.

'You will find it so in all religions, my dear Laetitia: the Hindoo, the Persian, ours. It is universal; an experience of our humanity. Deceit and sincerity cannot live together. Truth must kill the lie, or the lie will kill truth. I do not forgive. All I say to the person is, go!'

‘But that is right! that is generous!’ exclaimed Laetitia, glad to approve him for the sake of escaping her critical soul, and relieved by the idea of Clara’s difficulty solved.

‘*Capable* of generosity, perhaps,’ he mused, aloud.

She wounded him by not supplying the expected enthusiastic asseveration of her belief in his general tendency to magnanimity.

He said, after a pause: ‘But the world is not likely to be impressed by anything not immediately gratifying it. People change, I find: as we increase in years we cease to be the heroes we were. I myself am insensible to change: I do not admit the charge. Except in this we will say: personal ambition. I have it no more. And what is it when we have it? Decidedly a confession of inferiority! That is, the desire to be distinguished is an acknowledgement of insufficiency. But I have still the craving for my dearest friends to think well of me. A weakness? Call it so. Not a dishonourable weakness!’

Laetitia racked her brain for the connection of his present speech with the preceding dialogue. She was baffled, from not knowing ‘the heat of the centre in him’, as Vernon opaquely phrased it, in charity to the object of her worship.

‘Well,’ said he, unappeased, ‘and besides the passion to excel, I have changed somewhat in the heartiness of my thirst for the amusements incident to my station. I do not care to keep a stud – I was once tempted: nor hounds. And I can remember the day when I determined to have the best kennels and the best breed of horses in the kingdom. Puerile! What is distinction of that sort, or of any acquisition and accomplishment? We ask! One’s *self* is not the greater. To seek it, owns to our smallness, in real fact; and when it is attained, what then? My horses are good, they are admired, I challenge the county to surpass them: well? These are but my horses; the praise is of the animals, not of me. I decline to share in it. Yet I know men content to swallow the praise of their beasts and be semi-equine. The littleness of one’s fellows in the mob of life is a very strange experience! One may regret to have lost the simplicity of one’s forefathers, which could accept those and other distinctions with a cordial pleasure, not to say pride. As, for instance, I am, as it is called, a dead shot. “Give your acclamations, gentlemen, to my ancestors, from whom I inherited a steady hand and quick sight.” They do not touch *me*. Where I do not find myself – and *I* am *essentially* I – no applause can move me. To speak to you as I would speak to none, admiration – you know that in my early youth I swam in flattery – I had to swim to avoid drowning! – admiration of my personal gifts has grown tasteless. Changed, therefore, inasmuch as there has been a growth of spirituality. We are all in submission to mortal laws, and so far I have indeed changed. I

may add that it is unusual for country gentlemen to apply themselves to scientific researches. These are, however, in the spirit of the time. I apprehended that instinctively when at College. I forsook the classics for science. And thereby escaped the vice of domineering self-sufficiency peculiar to classical men, of which you had an amusing example in the carriage, on the way to Mrs Mountstuart’s this evening. Science is modest; slow, if you like; it deals with facts, and having mastered them, it masters men; of necessity, not with a stupid, loud-mouthed arrogance: words big and oddly garbed as the Pope’s body-guard. Of course, one bows to the Infallible; we must, when his giant mercenaries level bayonets.’

Sir Willoughby offered Miss Dale half a minute that she might in gentle feminine fashion acquiesce in the implied reproof of Dr Middleton’s behaviour to him during the drive to Mrs Mountstuart’s. She did not.

Her heart was accusing Clara of having done it a wrong and a hurt. For while he talked he seemed to her to justify Clara’s feelings and her conduct: and her own reawakened sensations of injury came to the surface a moment to look at him, affirming that they pardoned him, and pitied, but hardly wondered.

The heat of the centre in him had administered the comfort he wanted, though the conclusive accordant notes he loved on woman’s lips, that subservient harmony of another instrument desired of musicians when they have done their solo-playing, came not to wind up the performance: not a single bar. She did not speak. Probably his Laetitia was overcome, as he had long known her to be when they conversed; nerve-subdued, unable to deploy her mental resources or her musical. Yet ordinarily she had command of the latter. – Was she too condoling? Did a reason exist for it? Had the impulsive and desperate girl spoken out to Laetitia to the fullest? – shameless daughter of a domineering sire that she was! Ghastlier inquiry (it struck the centre of him with a sounding ring), was Laetitia pitying him overmuch for worse than the pain of a little difference between lovers – for treason on the part of his bride? Did she know of a rival? know more than he?

When the centre of him was violently struck he was a genius in penetration. He guessed that she did know: and by this was he presently helped to achieve pathos.

‘So my election was for Science,’ he continued; ‘and if it makes me, as I fear, a rara avis among country gentlemen, it unites me, puts me in the main, I may say, in the only current of progress – a word sufficiently despicable in their political jargon. – You enjoyed your evening at Mrs Mountstuart’s?’

‘Very greatly.’

‘She brings her Professor to dine here the day after to-morrow. Does it astonish you? You started.’

‘I did not hear the invitation.’

‘It was arranged at the table: you and I were separated – cruelly, I told her: she declared that we see enough of one another, and that it was good for me that we should be separated; neither of which is true. I may not have known what is the best for me: I do know what is good. If in my younger days I egregiously erred, that, taken of itself alone, is, assuming me to have sense and feeling, the surer proof of present wisdom. I can testify in person that wisdom is pain. If pain is to add to wisdom, let me suffer! Do you approve of that, Laetitia?’

‘It is well said.’

‘It is felt. Those who themselves have suffered should know the benefit of the resolution.’

‘One may have suffered so much as to wish only for peace.’

‘True: but you! have you?’

‘It would be for peace, if I prayed for any earthly gift.’

Sir Willoughby dropped a smile on her. ‘I mentioned the Pope’s parti-coloured body-guard just now. In my youth their singular attire impressed me. People tell me they have been re-uniformed: I am sorry. They remain one of my liveliest recollections of the Eternal City. They affected my sense of humour, always alert in me, as you are aware. We English have humour. It is the first thing struck in us when we land on the Continent: our risible faculties are generally active all through the tour. Humour, or the clash of sense with novel examples of the absurd, is our characteristic. I do not condescend to boisterous displays of it. I observe, and note the people’s comicalities for my correspondence. But you have read my letters – most of them, if not all?’

‘Many of them.’

‘I was with you then! – I was about to say – that Swiss-guard reminded me – you have not been in Italy. I have constantly regretted it. You are the very woman, you have the soul for Italy. I know no other of whom I could say it, with whom I should not feel that she was out of place, discordant with me. Italy and Laetitia! often have I joined you together. We shall see. I begin to have hopes. Here you have literally stagnated. Why, a dinner-party refreshes you! What would not travel do, and that heavenly climate! You are a reader of history and poetry. Well, poetry! I never yet saw the poetry that expressed the tenth part of what I feel in the presence of beauty and magnificence, and when I really meditate – profoundly. Call me a positive mind. I feel: only I feel too intensely for poetry. By the nature of it, poetry cannot be sincere. I will have sincerity. Whatever touches our emotions should be spontaneous, not a craft. I know you are in favour of poetry. You would win me, if any one could. But history! there I am with you. Walking over ruins: at night: the arches of the solemn black amphitheatre pouring moonlight on us – the moonlight of Italy!’

‘You would not laugh there, Sir Willoughby?’ said Laetitia, rousing herself from a stupor of apprehensive amazement, to utter something and realize actual circumstances.

‘Besides, you, I think, or I am mistaken in you’ – he deviated from his projected speech – ‘you are not a victim of the sense of association and the ludicrous.’

‘I can understand the influence of it: I have at least a conception of the humourous, but ridicule would not strike me in the Coliseum of Rome. I could not bear it, no, Sir Willoughby!’

She appeared to be taking him in very strong earnest, by thus petitioning him not to laugh in the Coliseum, and now he said: ‘Besides, you are one who could accommodate yourself to the society of the ladies, my aunts. Good women, Laetitia! I cannot imagine them de trop in Italy, or in a household. I have of course reason to be partial in my judgement.’

‘They are excellent and most amiable ladies; I love them,’ said Laetitia, fervently; the more strongly excited to fervour by her enlightenment as to his drift.

She read it that he designed to take her to Italy with the ladies: – after giving Miss Middleton her liberty; that was necessarily implied. And that was truly generous. In his boyhood he had been famous for his bountifulness in scattering silver and gold. Might he not have caused himself to be mis-perused in later life?

Clara had spoken to her of the visit and mission of the ladies to the library: and Laetitia daringly conceived herself to be on the certain track of his meaning, she being able to enjoy their society as she supposed him to consider that Miss Middleton did not, and would not either abroad or at home.

Sir Willoughby asked her: ‘You could travel with them?’

‘Indeed I could!’

‘Honestly?’

‘As affirmatively as one may protest. Delightedly.’

‘Agreed. It is an undertaking.’ He put his hand out. ‘Whether I be of the party or not! To Italy, Laetitia! It would give me pleasure to be with you, and it will, if I must be excluded, to think of you in Italy.’

His hand was out. She had to feign inattention or yield her own. She had not the effrontery to pretend not to see, and she yielded it. He pressed it, and whenever it shrunk a quarter inch to withdraw, he shook it up and down, as an instrument that had been lent him for due emphasis to his remarks. And very emphatic an amorous orator can make it upon a captive lady.

‘I am unable to speak decisively on that or any subject. I am, I think you once quoted, “tossed like a weed on the ocean.” Of myself I can speak: I cannot speak for a second person. I am infinitely harassed. If I could cry, “To Italy to-morrow!” Ah!… Do not set me down for complaining. I know the lot of man. But, Laetitia, deceit! deceit! It is a bad taste in the mouth. It sickens us of humanity. I compare it to an earthquake: we lose all our reliance on the solidity of the world. It is a betrayal not simply of the person; it is a betrayal of humankind. My friend! Constant friend! No, I will not despair. Yes, I have faults; I will remember them. Only, forgiveness is another question. Yes, the injury I *can* forgive; the falseness never. In the interests of humanity, no. So young, and such deceit!’

Laetitia’s bosom rose: her hand was detained: a lady who has yielded it cannot wrestle to have it back; those outworks which protect her treacherously shelter the enemy aiming at the citadel when he has taken them. In return for the silken armour bestowed on her by our civilization, it is exacted that she be soft and civil nigh up to perishing-point. She breathed tremulously high, saying on her top-breath: ‘If it – it may not be so; it can scarcely…’ A deep sigh intervened. It saddened her that she knew so much.

‘For when I love I love,’ said Sir Willoughby; ‘my friends and my servants know that. There can be no medium: not with me. I give all, I claim all. As I am absorbed, so must I absorb. We both cancel and create, we extinguish and we illumine one another. The error may be in the choice of an object: it is not in the passion. Perfect confidence, perfect abandonment. I repeat, I claim it because I give it. The selfishness of love may be denounced: it is a part of us. My answer would be, it is an element only of the noblest of us! Love, Laetitia! I speak of love. But one who breaks faith to drag us through the mire, who betrays, betrays and hands us over to the world, whose prey we become identically because of virtues we were educated to think it a blessing to possess: tell me the name for that! – Again, it has ever been a principle with me to respect the sex. But if we see women false, treacherous… Why indulge in these abstract views, you would ask! The world presses them on us, full as it is of the vilest specimens. They seek to pluck up every rooted principle: they sneer at our worship: they rob us of our religion. This bitter experience of the world drives us back to the antidote of what we knew before we plunged into it: of one… of something we esteemed and still esteem. Is that antidote strong enough to expel the poison? I hope so! I believe so! To lose faith in womankind is terrible.’

He studied her. She looked distressed: she was not moved.

She was thinking that, with the exception of a strain of haughtiness, he talked excellently to men, at least in the tone of the things he meant to say; but that his manner of talking to women went to an excess in the artificial tongue – the tutored tongue of sentimental deference of the towering male: he fluted exceedingly; and she wondered whether it was this which had wrecked him with Miss Middleton.

His intuitive sagacity counselled him to strive for pathos to move her. It was a task; for while he perceived her to be not ignorant of his plight, he doubted her knowing the extent of it, and as his desire was merely to move her without an exposure of himself, he had to compass being pathetic as it were under the impediments of a mailed and gauntletted knight, who cannot easily heave the bosom, or show it heaving.

Moreover, pathos is a tide: often it carries the awakener of it off his feet, and whirls him over and over armour and all in ignominious attitudes of helpless prostration, whereof he may well be ashamed in the retrospect. We cannot quite preserve our dignity when we stoop to the work of calling forth tears. Moses had probably to take a nimble jump away from the rock after that venerable Law-giver had knocked the water out of it.

However, it was imperative in his mind that he should be sure he had the power to move her.

He began; clumsily at first, as yonder gauntletted knight attempting the briny handkerchief.

‘What are we! We last but a very short time. Why not live to gratify our appetites? I might really ask myself why. All the means of satiating them are at my disposal. But no: I must aim at the highest: – at that which in my blindness I took for the highest. You know the sportsman’s instinct, Laetitia; he is not tempted by the stationary object. Such are we in youth, toying with happiness, leaving it, to aim at the dazzling and attractive.’

‘We gain knowledge,’ said Laetitia.

‘At what a cost!’

The exclamation summoned self-pity to his aid, and pathos was handy.

‘By paying half our lives for it and all our hopes! Yes, we gain knowledge, we are the wiser; very probably my value surpasses now what it was when I was happier. But the loss! That youthful bloom of the soul is like health to the body; once gone, it leaves cripples behind. Nay, my friend and precious friend, these four fingers I must retain. They seem to me the residue of a wreck: you shall be released shortly: absolutely, Laetitia, I have nothing else remaining – We have spoken of deception; what of being undeceived? – when one whom we adored is laid bare, and the wretched consolation of a worthy object is denied to us. No misfortune can be like that. Were it death, we could worship still. Death would be preferable. But may you be spared to know a situation in which the comparison with your inferior is forced on you to your disadvantage and your loss because of your generously giving up your whole heart to the custody of some shallow, light-minded, self – !… We will not deal in epithets. If I were to find as many bad names for the serpent as there are spots on his body, it would be serpent still, neither better nor worse.

The loneliness! And the darkness! Our luminary is extinguished. Self-respect refuses to continue worshipping, but the affection will not be turned aside. We are literally in the dust, we grovel, we would fling away self-respect if we could; we would adopt for a model the creature preferred to us; we would humiliate, degrade ourselves; we cry for justice as if it were for pardon…’

‘For pardon! when we are straining to grant it!’ Laetitia murmured, and it was as much as she could do. She remembered how in her old misery her efforts after charity had twisted her round to feel herself the sinner, and beg forgiveness in prayer: a noble sentiment, that filled her with pity of the bosom in which it had sprung. There was no similarity between his idea and hers, but her idea had certainly been roused by his word ‘pardon’, and he had the benefit of it in the moisture of her eyes. Her lips trembled, tears fell.

He had heard something; he had not caught the words, but they were manifestly favourable; her sign of emotion assured him of it and of the success he had sought. There was one woman who bowed to him to all eternity! He had inspired one woman with the mysterious, man-desired passion of self-abandonment, self-immolation! The evidence was before him. At any instant he could, if he pleased, fly to her and command her enthusiasm.

He had, in fact, perhaps by sympathetic action, succeeded in striking the same springs of pathos in her which animated his lively endeavour to produce it in himself.

He kissed her hand; then released it, quitting his chair to bend above her soothingly.

‘Do not weep, Laetitia, you see that I do not; I can smile. Help me to bear it; you must not unman me.’

She tried to stop her crying, but self-pity threatened to rain all her long years of grief on her head, and she said: ‘I must go… I am unfit… good-night, Sir Willoughby.’

Fearing seriously that he had sunk his pride too low in her consideration, and had been carried farther than he intended on the tide of pathos, he remarked: ‘We will speak about Crossjay to-morrow. His deceitfulness has been gross. As I said, I am grievously offended by deception. But you are tired. Good-night, my dear friend.’

‘Good-night, Sir Willoughby.’

She was allowed to go forth.

Colonel De Craye coming up from the smoking-room, met her and noticed the state of her eyelids, as he wished her good-night. He saw Willoughby in the room she had quitted, but considerately passed without speaking, and without reflecting why he was considerate.

Our hero’s review of the scene made him, on the whole, satisfied with his part in it. Of his power upon one woman he was now perfectly sure: – Clara had agonized him with a doubt of his personal mastery of any. One was a poor feast, but the pangs of his flesh during the last few days and the latest hours caused him to snatch at it, hungrily if contemptuously. A poor feast, she was yet a fortress, a point of succour, both shield and lance; a cover and an impetus. He could now encounter Clara boldly. Should she resist and defy him, he would not be naked and alone; he foresaw that he might win honour in the world’s eye from his position – a matter to be thought of only in most urgent need. The effect on him of his recent exercise in pathos was to compose him to slumber. He was for the period well satisfied.

His attendant imps were well satisfied likewise, and danced around about his bed after the vigilant gentleman had ceased to debate on the question of his unveiling of himself past forgiveness of her to Laetitia, and had surrendered to sleep the present direction of his affairs.

CHAPTER 32

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Laetitia Dale Discovers a Spiritual Change and Dr Middleton a Physical

CLARA tripped over the lawn in the early morning to Laetitia to greet her. She broke away from a colloquy with Colonel De Craye under Sir Willoughby's windows. The colonel had been one of the bathers, and he stood like a circus-driver flicking a wet towel at Crossjay capering.

'My dear, I am very unhappy!' said Clara.

'My dear, I bring you news,' Laetitia replied.

'Tell me. But the poor boy is to be expelled! He burst into Crossjay's bedroom last night and dragged the sleeping boy out of bed to question him, and he had the truth. That is one comfort: only Crossjay is to be driven from the Hall, because he was untruthful previously – for me; to serve me; really, I feel it was at my command. Crossjay will be out of the way to-day, and has promised to come back at night to try to be forgiven. You must help me, Laetitia.'

'You are free, Clara! If you desire it, you have but to ask for your freedom.'

'You mean…'

'He will release you.'

'You are sure?'

'We had a long conversation last night.'

'I owe it to you?'

'Nothing is owing to me. He volunteered it.'

Clara made as if to lift her eyes in apostrophe. 'Professor Crooklyn! Professor Crooklyn! I see. I did not guess that.'

'Give credit for some generosity, Clara; you are unjust.'

'By and by: I will be more than just by and by. I will practise on the trumpet: I will lecture on the greatness of the souls of men when we know them thoroughly. At present we do but half know them, and we are unjust. You are not deceived, Laetitia? There is to be no speaking to papa? no delusions? You have agitated me. I feel myself a very small person indeed. I feel I can understand those who admire him. He gives me back my word simply? clearly? without – Oh, that long wrangle in scenes and letters? And it will be arranged for papa and me to go not later than to-morrow? Never shall I be able to explain to any one how I fell into this! I am frightened at myself when I think of it. I take the whole blame: I have been scandalous. And, dear Laetitia! you came out so early in order to tell me?'

'I wished you to hear it.'

'Take my heart.'

'Present me with a part – but for good!'

'Fie! But you have a right to say it.'

'I mean no unkindness; but is not the heart you allude to an alarmingly searching one?'

'Selfish it is, for I have been forgetting Crossjay. If we are going to be generous, is not Crossjay to be forgiven? If it were only that the boy's father is away fighting for his country, endangering his life day by day, and for a stipend not enough to support his family, we are bound to think of the boy! Poor dear silly lad! with his "I say, Miss Middleton, why wouldn't (some one) see my father when he came here to call on him, and had to walk back ten miles in the rain?" – I could almost fancy that did me mischief… But we have a splendid morning after yesterday's rain. And we will be generous. Own, Laetitia, that it is possible to gild the most glorious day of creation.'

'Doubtless the spirit may do it and make its hues permanent,' said Laetitia.

'You to me, I to you, he to us. Well, then, if he does, it shall be one of my heavenly days. Which is for the probation of experience. We are not yet at sunset.'

'Have you seen Mr Whitford this morning?'

'He passed me.'

'Do not imagine him ever ill-tempered.'

'I had a governess, a learned lady, who taught me in person the picturesqueness of grumpiness. Her temper was ever perfect, because she was never in the wrong, but I being so, she was grumpy. She carried

my iniquity under her brows, and looked out on me through it. I was a trying child.'

Laetitia said, laughing: 'I can believe it!'

'Yet I liked her and she liked me: we were a kind of foreground and background: she threw me into relief, and I was an apology for her existence.'

'You picture her to me.'

'She says of me now that I am the only creature she has loved. Who knows that I may not come to say the same of her?'

'You would plague her and puzzle her still.'

'Have I plagued and puzzled Mr Whitford?'

'He reminds you of her?'

'You said you had her picture.'

'Ah, do not laugh at him. He is a true friend.'

'The man who can be a friend is the man who will presume to be a censor.'

'A mild one.'

'As to the sentence he pronounces, I am unable to speak, but his forehead is Rhadamanthine condemnation.'

'Dr Middleton!'

Clara looked round. 'Who? I? Did you hear an echo of papa? He would never have put Rhadamanthus over European souls, because it appears that Rhadamanthus judged only the Asiatic; so you are wrong, Miss Dale. My father is infatuated with Mr Whitford. What can it be? We women cannot sound the depths of scholars, probably because their pearls have no value in our market; except when they deign to chasten an impertinent; and Mr Whitford stands aloof from any notice of small fry. He is deep, studious, excellent; and does it not strike you that if he descended among us he would be like a Triton ashore?'

Laetitia's habit of wholly subservient sweetness, which was her ideal of the feminine, not yet conciliated with her acuter character, owing to the absence of full pleasure from her life – the unhealed wound she had sustained and the cramp of a bondage of such old date as to seem iron – induced her to say, as if consenting: 'You think he is not quite at home in society?' But she wished to defend him strenuously, and as a consequence she had to quit the self-imposed ideal of her daily acting, whereby – the case being unwonted, very novel to her – the lady's intelligence became confused through the process that quickened it; so sovereign a method of hoodwinking our bright selves is the acting of a part, however naturally it may come to us! and to this will each honest autobiographical member of the animated world bear witness.

She added: 'You have not found him sympathetic? He is. You fancy him brooding, gloomy? He is the reverse, he is cheerful, he is indifferent to personal misfortune. Dr Corney says there is no laugh like Vernon Whitford's, and no humour like his. Latterly he certainly… But it has not been your cruel word grumpiness. The truth is, he is anxious about Crossjay: and about other things; and he wants to leave. He is at a disadvantage beside very lively and careless gentlemen at present, but your "Triton ashore" is unfair, it is ugly. He is, I can say, the truest man I know.'

'I did not question his goodness, Laetitia.'

'You throw an accent on it.'

'Did I? I must be like Crossjay, who declares he likes fun best.'

'Crossjay ought to know him, if anybody should. Mr Whitford has defended you against me, Clara, even since I took to calling you Clara. Perhaps when you supposed him so like your ancient governess, he was meditating how he could aid you. Last night he gave me reasons for thinking you would do wisely to confide in Mrs Mountstuart. It is no longer necessary. I merely mention it. He is a devoted friend.'

'He is an untiring pedestrian.'

'Oh!'

Colonel De Craye, after hovering near the ladies in the hope of seeing them divide, now adopted the system of making three that two may come of it.

As he joined them with his glittering chatter, Laetitia looked at Clara to consult her, and saw the face rosy as a bride's.

The suspicion she had nursed sprung out of her arms a muscular fact on the spot.

'Where is my dear boy?' Clara said.

'Out for a holiday,' the colonel answered in her tone.

'Advise Mr Whitford not to waste his time in searching for Crossjay, Laetitia. Crossjay is better out of the

way to-day. At least, I thought so just now. Has he pocket-money, Colonel De Craye?'

'My lord can command his inn.'

'How thoughtful you are!'

Laetitia's bosom swelled upon a mute exclamation, equivalent to: 'Woman! woman! snared ever by the sparkling and frivolous! undiscerning of the faithful, the modest and beneficent!'

In the secret musings of moralists this dramatic rhetoric survives.

The comparison was all of her own making, and she was indignant at the contrast, though to what end she was indignant she could not have said, for she had no idea of Vernon as a rival of De Craye in the favour of a plighted lady. But she was jealous on behalf of her sex: her sex's reputation seemed at stake, and the purity of it was menaced by Clara's idle preference of the shallower man. When the young lady spoke so carelessly of being like Crossjay, she did not perhaps know that a likeness, based on a similarity of their enthusiasms, loves, and appetites, had been established between women and boys. Laetitia had formerly chafed at it, rejecting it utterly, save when now and then in a season of bitterness she handed here and there a volatile young lady (none but the young) to be stamped with the degrading brand. Vernon might be as philosophical as he pleased. To her the gaiety of these two, Colonel De Craye and Clara Middleton, was distressingly musical: they harmonized painfully. The representative of her sex was hurt by it.

She had to stay beside them: Clara held her arm. The colonel's voice dropped at times to something very like a whisper. He was answered audibly and smoothly. The quick-witted gentleman accepted the correction: but in immediately paying assiduous attentions to Miss Dale, in the approved intriguer's fashion, he showed himself in need of another amounting to a reproof. Clara said: 'We have been consulting, Laetitia, what is to be done to cure Professor Crooklyn of his cold.' De Craye perceived that he had taken a wrong step, and he was mightily surprised that a lesson in intrigue should be read to him of all men. Miss Middleton's audacity was not so astonishing: he recognized grand capabilities in the young lady. Fearing lest she should proceed further and cut away from him his vantage-ground of secrecy with her, he turned the subject and was adroitly submissive.

Clara's manner of meeting Sir Willoughby expressed a timid disposition to friendliness upon a veiled inquiry, understood by none save Laetitia, whose brain was racked to convey assurances to herself of her not having misinterpreted him. Could there be any doubt? She resolved that there could not be; and it was upon this basis of reason that she fancied she had led him to it. Legitimate or not, the fancy sprang from a solid foundation. Yesterday morning she could not have conceived it. Now she was endowed to feel that she had power to influence him, because now, since the midnight, she felt some emancipation from the spell of his physical mastery. He did not appear to her as a different man, but she had grown sensible of being a stronger woman. He was no more the cloud over her, nor the magnet; the cloud once heaven-suffused, the magnet fatally compelling her to sway round to him. She admired him still: his handsome air, his fine proportions, the courtesy of his bending to Clara and touching of her hand, excused a fanatical excess of admiration on the part of a woman in her youth, who

is never the anatomist of the hero's lordly graces. But now she admired him piecemeal. When it came to the putting of him together, she did it coldly. To compassionate him was her utmost warmth. Without conceiving in him anything of the strange old monster of earth which had struck the awakened girl's mind of Miss Middleton, Laetitia classed him with other men; he was 'one of them'. And she did not bring her disenchantment as a charge against him. She accused herself, acknowledged the secret of the change to be, and her youthfulness was dead: – otherwise could she have given him compassion, and not herself have been carried on the flood of it? The compassion was fervent, and pure too. She supposed he would supplicate; she saw that Clara Middleton was pleasant with him only for what she expected of his generosity. She grieved. Sir Willoughby was fortified by her sorrowful gaze as he and Clara passed out together to the laboratory arm in arm.

Laetitia had to tell Vernon of the uselessness of his beating the house and grounds for Crossjay. Dr Middleton held him fast in discussion upon an overnight's classical wrangle with Professor Crooklyn, which was to be renewed that day. The Professor had appointed to call expressly to renew it. 'A fine scholar,' said the Rev. Doctor, 'but crotchety, like all men who cannot stand their Port.'

'I hear that he had a cold,' Vernon remarked. 'I hope the wine was good, sir.'

As when the foreman of a sentimental jury is commissioned to inform an awful Bench exact in perspicuous English, of a verdict that must of necessity be pronounced in favour of the hanging of the culprit, yet would fain attenuate the crime of a palpable villain by a recommendation to mercy, such foreman, standing in the attentive eye of a master of grammatical construction, and feeling the weight of at least three sentences on his brain, together with a prospect of judicial interrogation for the discovery of his precise meaning, is oppressed, himself is put on trial in turn, and he hesitates, he recapitulates, the fear

of involution leads him to be involved; as far as a man so posted may, he on his own behalf appeals for mercy; entreats that his indistinct statement of preposterous reasons may be taken for understood, and would gladly, were permission to do it credible, throw in an imploring word that he may sink back among the crowd without for the one imperishable moment publicly swinging in his lordship's estimation: – much so, moved by chivalry toward a lady, courtesy to the recollection of a hostess, and particularly by the knowledge that his hearer would expect with a certain frigid rigour charity of him, Dr Middleton paused, spoke and paused: he stammered. Ladies, he said, were famous poisoners in the Middle Ages. His opinion was, that we had a class of manufacturing wine merchants on the watch for widows in this country. But he was bound to state the fact of his waking at his usual hour to the minute unassailed by headache. On the other hand, this was a condition of blessedness unanticipated when he went to bed. Mr Whitford, however, was not to think that he entertained rancour toward the wine. It was no doubt dispensed with the honourable intention of cheering. In point of flavour execrable, judging by results it was innocuous.

'The test of it shall be the effect of it upon Professor Crooklyn, and his appearance in the forenoon according to promise,' Dr Middleton came to an end with his perturbed balancings. 'If I hear more of the eight or twelve winds discharged at once upon a railway platform, and the young lady who dries herself of a drenching by drinking brandy and water with a gentleman at a railway inn, I shall solicit your sanction to my condemnation of the wine as anti-Bacchic and a counterfeit presentment. Do not misjudge me. Our hostess is not responsible. But widows should marry.'

'You must contrive to stop the Professor, sir, if he should attack his hostess in that manner,' said Vernon.

'Widows should marry!' Dr Middleton repeated.

He murmured of objecting to be at the discretion of a butler; unless, he was careful to add, the aforesaid functionary could boast of an University education; and even then, said he, it requires a line of ancestry to train a man's taste.

The Rev. Doctor smothered a yawn. The repression of it caused a second one, a real monster, to come, big as our old friend of the sea advancing on the chained-up Beauty.

Disconcerted by this damning evidence of indigestion, his countenance showed that he considered himself to have been too lenient to the wine of an unhusbanded hostess. He frowned terribly.

In the interval Laetitia told Vernon of Crossjay's flight for the day, hastily bidding the master to excuse him: she had no time to hint the grounds of excuse. Vernon mentally made a guess.

Dr Middleton took his arm and discharged a volley at the crotchetty scholarship of Professor Crooklyn, whom to confute by book, he directed his march to the library. Having persuaded himself that he was dyspeptic, he had grown irascible. He denounced all dining out, eulogized Patterne Hall as if it were his home, and remembered he had dreamed in the night – a most humiliating sign of physical disturbance. 'But let me find a house in proximity to Patterne, as I am induced to suppose I shall,' he said, 'and here only am I to be met when I stir abroad.'

Laetitia went to her room. She was complacently anxious enough to prefer solitude and be willing to read. She was more seriously anxious about Crossjay than about any of the others. For Clara would be certain to speak very definitely, and how then could a gentleman oppose her? He would supplicate, and could she be brought to yield? It was not to be expected of a young lady who had turned from Sir Willoughby. His inferiors would have had a better chance. Whatever his faults, he had that element of greatness which excludes the intercession of pity. Supplication would be with him a form of condescension. It would be seen to be such. His was a monumental pride that could not stoop. She had preserved this image of the gentleman for a relic in the shipwreck of her idolatry. So she mused between the lines of her book, and finishing her reading and marking the page, she glanced down on the lawn. Dr Middleton was there, and alone; his hands behind his back, his head bent. His meditative pace and unwonted perusal of the turf proclaimed that a non-sentimental jury within had delivered an unmitigated verdict upon the widow's wine. Laetitia hurried to find Vernon.

He was in the hall. As she drew near him, the laboratory door opened and shut.

'It is being decided,' said Laetitia.

Vernon was paler than the hue of perfect calmness.

'I want to know whether I ought to take to my heels like Crossjay, and shun the Professor,' he said.

They spoke in under-tones, furtively watching the door.

'I wish what she wishes, I am sure; but it will go badly with the boy,' said Laetitia.

'Oh, well, then I'll take him,' said Vernon, 'I would rather. I think I can manage it.'

Again the laboratory door opened. This time it shut behind Miss Middleton. She was highly flushed. Seeing them, she shook the storm from her brows, with a dead smile; the best piece of serenity she could

put on for public wear.

She took a breath before she moved.

Vernon strode out of the house.

Clara swept up to Laetitia.

‘You were deceived!’

The hard sob of anger barred her voice.

Laetitia begged her to come to her room with her.

‘I want air: I must be by myself,’ said Clara, catching at her garden-hat.

She walked swiftly to the portico steps and turned to the right, to avoid the laboratory windows.

CHAPTER 33

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In Which the Comic Muse Has an Eye on Two Good Souls

CLARA met Vernon on the bowling-green among the laurels. She asked him where her father was.

‘Don’t speak to him now,’ said Vernon.

‘Mr Whitford, will you?’

‘It is not advisable just now. Wait.’

‘Wait? Why not now?’

‘He is not in the right humour.’

She choked. There are times when there is no medicine for us in sages, we want slaves; we scorn to temporize, we must overbear. On she sped, as if she had made the mistake of exchanging words with a post.

The scene between herself and Willoughby was a thick mist in her head, except the burden and result of it, that he held to her fast, would neither assist her to depart nor disengage her.

Oh, men! men! They astounded the girl; she could not define them to her understanding. Their motives, their tastes, their vanity, their tyranny, and the domino on their vanity, the baldness of their tyranny, clinched her in feminine antagonism to brute power. She was not the less disposed to rebellion by a very present sense of the justice of what could be said to reprove her. She had but one answer: ‘Anything but marry him!’ It threw her on her nature, our last and headlong advocate, who is quick as the flood to hurry us from the heights to our level, and lower, if there be accidental gaps in the channel. For say we have been guilty of misconduct: can we redeem it by violating that which we are and live by? The question sinks us back to the luxuriousness of a sunny relinquishment of effort in the direction against tide. Our nature, becomes ingenious in devices, penetrative of the enemy, confidently citing its cause for being frankly elfish or worse. Clara saw a particular way of forcing herself to be surrendered. She shut her eyes from it: the sight carried her too violently to her escape; but her heart caught it up and huzzaed. To press the points of her fingers at her bosom, looking up to the sky as she did, and cry: ‘I am not my own; I am his!’ was instigation sufficient to make her heart leap up with all her body’s blush to urge it to recklessness. A despairing creature then may say she has addressed the heavens and has had no answer to restrain her.

Happily for Miss Middleton, she had walked some minutes in her chafing fit before the falcon eye of Colonel De Craye spied her away on one of the beech-knots.

Vernon stood irresolute. It was decidedly not a moment for disturbing Dr Middleton’s composure. He meditated upon a conversation, as friendly as possible, with Willoughby. Round on the front-lawn, he beheld Willoughby and Dr Middleton together, the latter having halted to lend attentive ear to his excellent host. Unnoticed by them or disregarded, Vernon turned back to Laetitia, and sauntered, talking with her of things current for as long as he could endure to listen to praise of his pure self-abnegation; proof of how well he had disguised himself, but it smacked unpleasantly to him. His humourous intimacy with men’s minds likened the source of this distaste to the gallant all-or-nothing of the gambler, who hates the little when he cannot have the much, and would rather stalk from the tables clean-picked than suffer ruin to be tickled by driblets of the glorious fortune he has played for and lost. If we are not to be beloved, spare us the small coin of compliments on character; especially when they compliment only our acting. It is partly endurable to win eulogy for our stately fortitude in losing, but Laetitia was unaware that he flung away a

stake; so she could not praise him for his merits.

'Willoughby makes the pardoning of Crossjay conditional,' he said, 'and the person pleading for him has to grant the terms. How could you imagine Willoughby would give her up! How could he! Who!… He should, is easily said. I was no witness of the scene between them just now, but I could have foretold the end of it; I could almost recount the passages. The consequence is, that everything depends upon the amount of courage she possesses. Dr Middleton won't leave Patterne yet. And it is of no use to speak to him to-day. And she is by nature impatient, and is rendered desperate.'

'Why is it of no use to speak to Dr Middleton today?' cried Laetitia.

'He drank wine yesterday that did not agree with him; he can't work. To-day he is looking forward to Patterne Port. He is not likely to listen to any proposals to leave to-day.'

'Goodness!'

'I know the depth of that cry!'

'*You* are excluded, Mr Whitford.'

'Not a bit of it; I am in with the rest. Say that men are to be exclaimed at. Men have a right to expect you to know your own minds when you close on a bargain. You don't know the world or yourselves very well, it's true; still the original error is on your side, and upon that you should fix your attention. She brought her father here, and no sooner was he very comfortably established than she wished to dislocate him.'

'I cannot explain it; I cannot comprehend it,' said Laetitia.

'You are Constancy.'

'No.' She coloured. 'I am "in with rest". I do not say I should have done the same. But I have the knowledge that I must not sit in judgement on her. I can waver.'

She coloured again. She was anxious that he should know her to be not that stupid statue of Constancy in a corner doating on the antic Deception. Reminiscences of the interview overnight made it oppressive to her to hear herself praised for always pointing like the needle. Her newly enfranchised individuality pressed to assert its existence. Vernon, however, not

seeing this novelty, continued, to her excessive discomfort, to baste her old abandoned image with his praises. They checked hers; and, moreover, he had suddenly conceived an envy of her life-long, uncomplaining, almost unaspiring, constancy of sentiment. If you know lovers when they have not reason to be blissful, you will remember that in this mood of admiring envy they are given to fits of uncontrollable maundering. Praise of constancy, moreover, smote shadowily a certain inconstant, enough to seem to ruffle her smoothness and do no hurt. He found his consolation in it, and poor Laetitia writhed. Without designing to retort, she instinctively grasped at a weapon of defence in further exalting his devotedness; which reduced him to cast his head to the

heavens and implore them to partially enlighten her. Nevertheless, maunder he must; and he recurred to it in a way so utterly unlike himself that Laetitia stared in his face. She wondered whether there could be anything secreted behind this everlasting theme of constancy. He took her awakened gaze for a summons to asseverations of sincerity, and out they came. She would have fled from him, but to think of flying was to think how little it was that urged her to fly, and yet the thought of remaining and listening to praises undeserved and no longer flattering, was a torture.

'Mr Whitford, I bear no comparison with you.'

'I do and must set you for my example, Miss Dale.'

'Indeed, you do wrongly; you do not know me.'

'I could say that. For years…!'

'Pray, Mr Whitford!'

'Well, I have admired it. You show us how self can be smothered.'

'An echo would be a retort on you!'

'On me? I am never thinking of anything else.'

'I could say that.'

'You are necessarily conscious of not swerving.'

'But I do; I waver dreadfully; I am not the same two days running.'

'You are the same, with "ravishing divisions" upon the same.'

'And you without the "divisions". I draw such support as I have from you.'

'From some simulacrum of me, then. And that will show you how little you require support.'

'I do not speak my own opinion only.'

‘Whose?’

‘I am not alone.’

‘Again let me say, I wish I were like you!’

‘Then let me add, I would willingly make the exchange!’

‘You would be amazed at your bargain.’

‘Others would be!’

‘Your exchange would give me the qualities I’m in want of, Miss Dale.’

‘Negative, passive, at the best, Mr Whitford. But *I* should have…’

‘Oh! – pardon me. But you inflict the sensations of a boy, with a dose of honesty in him, called up to receive a prize he has won by the dexterous use of a crib.’

‘And how do you suppose she feels who has a crown of Queen o’ the May forced on her head when she is verging on November?’

He rejected her analogy, and she his. They could neither of them bring to light the circumstances which made one another’s admiration so unbearable. The more he exalted her for constancy, the more did her mind become bent upon critically examining the object of that imagined virtue; and the more she praised him for possessing the spirit of perfect friendliness, the fiercer grew the passion in him which disdained the imputation, hissing like a heated iron-bar that flings the water-drops to steam. He would none of it; would rather have stood exposed in his profound foolishness.

Amiable though they were, and mutually affectionate, they came to a stop in their walk, longing to separate, and not seeing how it was to be done, they had so knit themselves together with the pelting of their interlaudation.

‘I think it is time for me to run home to my father for an hour,’ said Laetitia.

‘I ought to be working,’ said Vernon.

Good progress was made to the disgarlanding of themselves thus far; yet, an acutely civilized pair, the abruptness of the transition from floweriness to commonplace affected them both, Laetitia chiefly, as she had broken the pause, and she remarked: ‘I am really Constancy in my opinions.’

‘Another title is customary where stiff opinions are concerned. Perhaps by and by you will learn your mistake, and then you will acknowledge the name for it.’

‘How?’ said she. ‘What shall I learn?’

‘If you learn that I am a grisly Egoist?’

‘You? And it would not be egoism,’ added Laetitia, revealing to him at the same instant as to herself that she swung suspended on a scarce credible guess.

‘– Will nothing pierce your ears, Mr Whitford?’

He heard the intruding voice, but he was bent on rubbing out the cloudy letters Laetitia had begun to spell, and he stammered, in a tone of matter-of-fact: ‘Just that and no better’; then turned to Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson.

‘– Or are you resolved you will never see Professor Crooklyn when you look on him?’ said the great lady.

Vernon bowed to the Professor and apologized to him shufflingly and rapidly, incoherently, and with a red face; which induced Mrs Mountstuart to scan Laetitia’s.

After lecturing Vernon for his abandonment of her yesterday evening, and flouting his protestations, she returned to the business of the day. ‘We walked from the lodge-gates to see the park and prepare ourselves for Dr Middleton. We parted last night in the middle of a controversy and are rageing to resume it. Where is our redoubtable antagonist?’

Mrs Mountstuart wheeled Professor Crooklyn round to accompany Vernon.

‘We,’ she said, ‘are for modern English scholarship, opposed to the champion of German.’

‘The contrary,’ observed Professor Crooklyn.

‘Oh! We,’ she corrected the error serenely, ‘are for German scholarship opposed to English.’

‘Certain editions.’

‘We defend certain editions.’

‘Defend is a term of imperfect application to my position, ma’am.’

‘My dear Professor, you have in Dr Middleton a match for you in conscientious pugnacity, and you will not waste it upon me. There, there they are; there he is. Mr Whitford will conduct you. I stand away from the first shock.’

Mrs Mountstuart fell back to Laetitia, saying: ‘He pores over a little inexactitude in phrases, and pecks at it like a domestic fowl.’

Professor Crooklyn’s attitude and air were so well described that Laetitia could have laughed.

‘These mighty scholars have their flavour,’ the great lady hastened to add, lest her younger companion should be misled to suppose that they were not valuable to a governing hostess: ‘their shadow-fights are ridiculous, but they have their flavour at a table. Last night, no: I discard all mention of last night. We failed: as none else in this neighbourhood could fail, but we failed. If we have among us a cormorant-devouring young lady who drinks up all the – ha! – brandy and water – of our inns and occupies all our flys, why, our condition is abnormal, and we must expect to fail: we are deprived of accommodation for accidental circumstances. How Mr Whitford could have missed seeing Professor Crooklyn! And what was *he* doing at the station, Miss Dale?’

‘Your portrait of Professor Crooklyn was too striking, Mrs Mountstuart, and deceived him by its excellence. He appears to have seen only the blank side of the slate.’

‘Ah! He is a faithful friend of his cousin, do you not think?’

‘He is the truest of friends.’

‘As for Dr Middleton,’ Mrs Mountstuart diverged from her inquiry, ‘he will swell the letters of my vocabulary to gigantic proportions if I see much of him: he is contagious.’

‘I believe it is a form of his humour.’

‘I caught it of him yesterday at my dinner-table in my distress, and must pass it off as a form of mine, while it lasts. I talked Dr Middleton half the dreary night through to my pillow. Your candid opinion, my dear, come! As for me, I don’t hesitate. We seemed to have sat down to a solitary performance on the bass-viol. We were positively an assembly of insects during thunder. My very soul thanked Colonel De Craye for his diversions, but I heard nothing but Dr Middleton. It struck me that my table was petrified, and every one sat listening to bowls played overhead.’

‘I was amused.’

‘Really? You delight me. Who knows but that my guests were sincere in their congratulations on a thoroughly successful evening? I have fallen to this, you see! And I know wretched people! that as often as not it is their way of condolling with one. I do it myself: but only where there have been amiable efforts. But imagine *my* being congratulated for that! – Good-morning, Sir Willoughby. – The worst offender! and I am in no pleasant mood with him,’ Mrs Mountstuart said aside to Laetitia, who drew back, retiring.

Sir Willoughby came on a step or two. He stopped to watch Laetitia’s figure swimming to the house.

So, as, for instance, beside a stream, when a flower on the surface extends its petals drowning to subside in the clear still water, we exercise our privilege to be absent in the charmed contemplation of a beautiful natural incident.

A smile of pleased abstraction melted on his features.

CHAPTER 34

Mrs Mountstuart and Sir Willoughby

‘GOOD-MORNING, my dear Mrs Mountstuart,’ Sir Willoughby wakened himself to address the great lady. ‘Why has she fled?’

‘Has any one fled?’

‘Laetitia Dale.’

‘Letty Dale? Oh, if you call that flying. Possibly to renew a close conversation with Vernon Whitford, that I cut short. You frightened me with your “Shepherds-tell-me” air and tone. Lead me to one of your garden-seats: out of hearing to Dr Middleton, I beg. He mesmerizes me, he makes me talk Latin. I was curiously susceptible last night. I know I shall everlastingly associate him with an abortive entertainment and solos on big instruments. We were flat.’

‘Horace was in good vein.’

‘You were not.’

‘And Laetitia – Miss Dale talked well, I thought.’

‘She talked with you, and no doubt she talked well. We did not mix. The yeast was bad. You shot darts at Colonel De Craye: you tried to sting. You brought Dr Middleton down on you. Dear me, that man is a reverberation in my head. Where is your lady and love?’

‘Who?’

‘Am I to name her?’

‘Clara? I have not seen her for the last hour. Wandering, I suppose.’

‘A very pretty summer bower,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, seating herself. ‘Well, my dear Sir Willoughby, preferences, preferences are not to be accounted for, and one never knows whether to pity or congratulate, whatever may occur. I want to see Miss Middleton.’

‘Your “dainty rogue in porcelain” will be at your beck –you lunch with us? – before you leave.’

‘So now you have taken to quoting me, have you?’

‘But “a romantic tale on her eyelashes” is hardly descriptive any longer.’

‘Descriptive of whom? Now you are upon Laetitia Dale!’

‘I quote you generally. She has now a graver look.’

‘And well may have!’

‘Not that the romance has entirely disappeared.’

‘No; it looks as if it were in print.’

‘You have hit it perfectly, as usual, ma’am.’

Sir Willoughby mused.

Like one resuming his instrument to take up the melody in a concerted piece, he said: ‘I thought Laetitia Dale had a singularly animated air last night.’

‘Why –!’ Mrs Mountstuart mildly gaped.

‘I want a new description of her. You know, I collect your mottoes and sentences.’

‘It seems to me she is coming three parts out of her shell, and wearing it as a hood for convenience.’

‘Ready to issue forth at an invitation? Admirable! exact!’

‘Ay, my good Sir Willoughby, but are we so very admirable and exact? Are we never to know our own minds?’

He produced a polysyllabic sigh, like those many-jointed compounds of poets in happy languages, which are copious in a single expression: ‘Mine is known to me. It always has been. Cleverness in women is not uncommon. Intellect is the pearl. A woman of intellect is as good as a Greek statue; she is divinely wrought, and she is divinely rare.’

‘Proceed,’ said the lady, confiding a cough to the air.

‘The rarity of it: and it is not mere intellect, it is a sympathetic intellect; or else it is an intellect in perfect accord with an intensely sympathetic disposition; – the rarity of it makes it too precious to be parted with when once we have met it. I prize it the more the older I grow.’

‘Are we on the feminine or the neuter?’

‘I beg pardon?’

‘The universal or the individual?’

He shrugged. ‘For the rest, psychological affinities may exist coincident with and entirely independent of material or moral prepossessions, relations, engagements, ties.’

‘Well, that is not the raving of passion, certainly,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, ‘and it sounds as if it were a comfortable doctrine for men. On that plea, you might all of you be having Aspasia and a wife. We saw your fair Middleton and Colonel de Craye at a distance as we entered the park. Professor Crooklyn is under some hallucination.’

‘What more likely?’

The readiness and the double-bearing of the reply struck her comic sense with awe.

‘The Professor must hear that. He insists on the fly, and the inn, and the wet boots, and the warming mixture, and the testimony of the landlady and the railway porter.’

‘I say, what more likely?’

‘Than that he should insist?’

‘If he is under the hallucination!’

‘He may convince others.’

‘I have only to repeat…’

‘ “What more likely?” It’s extremely philosophical. Coincident with a pursuit of the psychological affinities.’

‘Professor Crooklyn will hardly descend, I suppose, from his classical altitudes to lay his hallucinations before Dr Middleton?’

‘Sir Willoughby, you are the pink of chivalry!’

By harping on Laetitia, he had emboldened Mrs Mountstuart to lift the curtain upon Clara. It was offensive to him, but the injury done to his pride had to be endured for the sake of his general plan of self-protection.

‘Simply desirous to save my guests from annoyance of any kind,’ he said, ‘Dr Middleton can look “Olympus and thunder”, as Vernon calls it.’

‘Don’t. I see him. That look! It is Dictionary-bitten! Angry, horned Dictionary! – an apparition of Dictionary in the night – to a dunce!’

‘One would undergo a good deal to avoid the sight.’

‘What the man must be in a storm! Speak as you please of yourself: you are a true and chivalrous knight to dread it for her. But now, candidly, how is it you cannot condescend to a little management? Listen to an old friend. You are too lordly. No lover can afford to be incomprehensible for half an hour. Stoop a little. Sermonizings are not to be thought of. You can govern unseen. You are to know that I am one who disbelieves in philosophy in love. I admire the look of it, I give no credit to the assumption. I rather like lovers to be out at times: it makes them picturesque, and it enlivens their monotony. I perceived she had a spot of wildness. It’s proper that she should wear it off before marriage.’

‘Clara? The wildness of an infant!’ said Willoughby, paternally, musing over an inward shiver. ‘You saw her at a distance just now, or you might have heard her laughing. Horace diverts her excessively.’

‘I owe him my eternal gratitude for his behaviour last night. She was one of my bright faces. Her laughter was delicious; rain in the desert! It will tell you what the load on me was, when I assure you those two were merely a spectacle to me – points I scored in a lost game. And I know they were witty.’

‘They both have wit; a kind of wit,’ Willoughby assented.

‘They struck together like a pair of cymbals.’

‘Not the highest description of instrument. However, they amuse me. I like to hear them when I am in the vein.’

‘That vein should be more at command with you, my friend. You can be perfect, if you like.’

‘Under your tuition.’

Willoughby leaned to her, bowing languidly. He was easier in his pain for having hoodwinked the lady. She was the outer world to him; she could tune the world’s voice; prescribe which of the two was to be pitied, himself or Clara; and he did not intend it to be himself, if it came to the worst.

They were far away from that at present, and he continued: ‘Probably a man’s power of putting on a face is not equal to a girl’s. I detest petty dissensions. Probably I show it when all is not quite smooth. Little fits of suspicion vex me. It is a weakness, not to play them off, I know. Men have to learn the arts which come to women by nature. I don’t sympathize with suspicion, from having none myself.’

His eyebrows shot up. That ill-omened man Flitch had sidled round by the bushes to within a few feet of him.

Flitch primarily defended himself against the accusation of drunkenness, which was hurled at him to account for his audacity in trespassing against the interdict; but he admitted that he had taken ‘something short’ for a fortification in visiting scenes where he had once been happy – at Christmastide, when all the servants, and the butler at head, grey old Mr Chessington, sat in rows, toasting the young heir of the old Hall in the old port wine! Happy had he been then, before ambition for a shop, to be his own master and an independent gentleman, had led him into his quagmire: – to look back envying a dog on the old estate, and sigh for the smell of Patterne stables: sweeter than Arabia, his drooping nose appeared to say.

He held up close against it something that imposed silence on Sir Willoughby as effectively as a cunning exordium in oratory will enchain mobs to swallow what is not complimenting them; and this he displayed secure in its being his licence to drivel his abominable pathos. Sir Willoughby recognized Clara’s purse. He understood at once how the man must have come by it: he was not so quick in devising a means of stopping the tale. Flitch foiled him. ‘Intact,’ he replied to the question: ‘What have you there?’ He repeated this grand word. And then he turned to Mrs Mountstuart to speak of Paradise and Adam, in whom he saw the prototype of himself; also the Hebrew people in the bondage of Egypt, discoursed of by the clergymen, not

without a likeness to him.

'Sorrows have done me one good, to send me attentive to church, my lady,' said Flitch, 'when I might have gone to London, the coachman's home, and been driving some honourable family, with no great advantage to my morals, according to what I hear of. And a purse found under the seat of a fly in London would have a poor chance of returning *intact* to the young lady losing it.'

'Put it down on that chair; inquiries will be made, and you will see Sir Willoughby,' said Mrs Mountstuart. 'Intact, no doubt; it is not disputed.'

With one motion of a finger she set the man rounding. Flitch halted; he was very regretful of the termination of his feast of pathos, and he wished to relate the finding of the purse, but he could not encounter Mrs Mountstuart's look; he slouched away in very close resemblance to the ejected Adam of illustrated books.

'It's my belief that naturalness among the common people has died out of the kingdom,' she said.

Willoughby charitably apologized for him. 'He has been fuddling himself.'

Her vigilant considerateness had dealt the sensitive gentleman a shock, plainly telling him she had her ideas of his actual posture. Nor was he unhurt by her superior acuteness and her display of authority on his grounds.

He said, boldly, as he weighed the purse, half tossing it: 'It's not unlike Clara's.'

He feared that his lips and cheeks were twitching, and as he grew aware of a glassiness of aspect that would reflect any suspicion of a keen-eyed woman, he became bolder still! 'Laetitia's, I know it is not. Hers is an ancient purse.'

'A present from you!'

'How do you hit on that, my dear lady?'

'Deductively.'

'Well, the purse looks as good as new in quality, like the owner.'

'The poor dear has not much occasion for using it.'

'You are mistaken: she uses it daily.'

'If it were better filled, Sir Willoughby, your old scheme might be arranged. The parties do not appear so unwilling. Professor Crooklyn and I came on them just now rather by surprise, and I assure you their heads were close, faces meeting, eyes musing.'

'Impossible.'

'Because when they approach the point, you won't allow it! Selfish!'

'Now,' said Willoughby, very animatedly, 'question Clara. Now, do, my dear Mrs Mountstuart, do speak to Clara on that head; she will convince you I have striven quite recently: – against myself, if you like. I have instructed her to aid me, given her the fullest instructions, carte blanche. *She* cannot possibly have a doubt. I may look to her to remove any you may entertain from your mind on the subject. I have proposed, seconded, and chorussed it, and it will *not* be arranged. If you expect me to deplore that fact, I can only answer that my actions are under my control, my feelings are not. I will do everything consistent with the duties of a man of honour – perpetually running into fatal errors because he did not

properly consult the dictates of those feelings at the right season. I can violate them: but I can no more command them than I can my destiny. They were crushed of old, and so let them be now. Sentiments we won't discuss; though you know that sentiments have a bearing on social life: are factors, as they say in their later jargon. I never speak of mine. To you I could. It is not necessary. If old Vernon, instead of flattening his chest at a desk, had any manly ambition to take part in public affairs, she would be the woman for him. I have called her my Egeria. She would be his Cornelia. One could swear of her that she would have noble off-spring! – But old Vernon has had his disappointment, and will moan over it up to

the end. And she? So it appears. I have tried; yes, personally: without effect. In other matters I may have influence with her: not in that one. She declines. She will live and die Laetitia Dale. We are alone: I confess to you, I love the name. It's an old song in my ears. Do not be too ready with a name for *me*. Believe me – I speak from my experience hitherto – there is a fatality in these things. I cannot conceal from my poor girl that this fatality exists…'

'Which is the poor girl at present?' said Mrs Mountstuart, cool in a mystification.

'And though she will tell you that I have authorized and – Clara Middleton – done as much as man can to institute the union you suggest, she will own that she is conscious of the presence of this – fatality, I call it for want of a better title – between us. It drives her in one direction, me in another – or would, if I submitted to the pressure. She is not the first who has been conscious of it.'

‘Are we laying hold of a third poor girl?’ said Mrs Mountstuart. ‘Ah! I remember. And I remember we used to call it playing fast and loose in those days, not fatality. It is very strange. It may be that you were unblushingly courted in those days, and excusable; and we all supposed… but away you went for your tour.’

‘My mother’s medical receipt for me. Partially it succeeded. She was for grand marriages: not I. I could make, I could not be, a sacrifice. And then I went in due time to Doctor Cupid on my own account. She has the kind of attraction… But one changes! On revient toujours. First we begin with a liking; then we give ourselves up to the passion of beauty: then comes the serious question of suitableness of the mate to match us; and perhaps we discover that we were wiser in early youth than somewhat later. However, she has beauty. Now, Mrs Mountstuart, you do admire her. Chase the idea of the “dainty rogue” out of your view of her: you admire her: she is captivating; she has a particular charm of her own, nay, she has real beauty.’

Mrs Mountstuart fronted him to say: ‘Upon my word, my dear Sir Willoughby, I think she has it to such a degree that I don’t know the man who could hold out against her if she took the field. She is one of the women who are dead shots with men. Whether it’s in their tongues or their eyes, or it’s an effusion and an atmosphere – whatever it is, it’s a spell, another fatality for you!’

‘Animal; not spiritual!’

‘Oh, she hasn’t the head of Letty Dale.’

Sir Willoughby allowed Mrs. Mountstuart to pause and follow her thoughts.

‘Dear me!’ she exclaimed. ‘I noticed a change in Letty Dale last night; and to-day. She looked fresher and younger; extremely well: which is not what I can say for you, my friend. Fatalizing is not good for the complexion.’

‘Don’t take away my health, pray,’ cried Willoughby, with a snapping laugh.

‘Be careful,’ said Mrs Mountstuart. ‘You have got a sentimental tone. You talk of “feelings crushed of old”. It is to a woman, not to a man that you speak, but that sort of talk is a way of making the ground slippery. I listen in vain for a natural tongue; and when I don’t hear it, I suspect plotting in men. You show your under-teeth too at times when you draw in a breath, like a condemned high-caste Hindoo my husband took me to see in a jail in Calcutta, to give me some excitement when I was pining for England. The creature did it regularly as he breathed; you did it last night, and you have been doing it to-day, as if the air cut you to the quick. You have been spoilt. You have been too much anointed. What I’ve just mentioned is a sign with me of a settled something on the brain of a man.’

‘The brain?’ said Sir Willoughby, frowning.

‘Yes, you laugh sourly, to look at,’ said she. ‘Mountstuart told me that the muscles of the mouth betray men sooner than the eyes, when they have cause to be uneasy in their minds.’

‘But, ma’am, I shall not break my word; I shall not, not; I intend, I have resolved to keep it. I do *not* fatalize, let my complexion be black or white. Despite my resemblance to a high-caste malefactor of the Calcutta prison-wards…’

‘Friend! friend! you know how I chatter.’

He saluted her finger-ends. ‘Despite the extraordinary display of teeth, you will find me go to execution with perfect calmness; with a resignation as good as happiness.’

‘Like a Jacobite lord under the Georges.’

‘You have told me that you wept to read of one: like him, then. My principles have not changed, if I have. When I was younger, I had an idea of a wife who would be with me in my thoughts as well as aims: a woman with a spirit of romance, and a brain of solid sense. I shall sooner or later dedicate myself to a public life; and shall, I suppose, want the counsellor or comforter who ought always to be found at home. It may be unfortunate that I have the ideal in my head. But I would never make rigorous demands for specific qualities. The cruellest thing in the world is to set up a living model before a wife, and compel her to copy it. In any case, here we are upon the road: the die is cast. I shall not reprieve myself. I cannot release her. Marriage represents facts, courtship fancies. She will be cured by-and-by of that coveting of everything that I do, feel, think, dream, imagine… ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum. Laetitia was invited here to show her the example of a fixed character – solid as any concrete substance you would choose to build on, and not a whit the less feminine.’

‘Ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum. You need not tell me you have a design in all that you do, Willoughby Patterne.’

‘You smell the autocrat? Yes, he can mould and govern the creatures about him. His toughest rebel is himself! If you see Clara… You wish to see her, I think you said?’

‘Her behaviour to Lady Busshe last night was queer.’

‘If you will. She makes a mouth at porcelaine. Toujours la porcelain! For me, her pettishness is one of her charms, I confess it. Ten years younger, I could not have compared them.’

‘Whom?’

‘Laetitia and Clara.’

‘Sir Willoughby, in any case, to quote you, here we are all upon the road, and we must act as if events were going to happen; and I must ask her to help me on the subject of my wedding-present, for I don’t want to have her making mouths at mine, however pretty – and she does it prettily.’

‘ “Another dedicatory offering to the *rogue* in me!” she says of porcelain.’

‘Then porcelain it shall not be. I mean to consult her; I have come determined upon a chat with her. I think I understand. But she produces false impressions on those who don’t know you both. “I shall have that porcelain back”, says Lady Busshe to me, when we were shaking hands last night: “I think,” says she, “it should have been the Willow Pattern.” And she really said: “He’s in for being jilted a second time!” ’

Sir Willoughby restrained a bound of his body that would have sent him up some feet into the air. He felt his skull thundered at within.

‘Rather than that it should fall upon her!’ ejaculated he, correcting his resemblance to the high-caste culprit as soon as it recurred to him.

‘But you know Lady Busshe,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, genuinely solicitous to ease the proud man of his pain. She could see through him to the depth of the skin, which his fencing sensitiveness vainly attempted to cover as it did the heart of him. ‘Lady Busshe is nothing without her flights, fads, and fancies. She has always insisted that you have an unfortunate nose. I remember her saying on the day of your majority, it was the nose of a monarch destined to lose a throne.’

‘Have I ever offended Lady Busshe?’

‘She trumpets you. She carries Lady Culmer with her too, and you may expect a visit of nods and hints and pots of alabaster. They worship you: you are the hope of England in their eyes, and no woman is worthy of you: but they are a pair of fatalists, and if you begin upon Letty Dale with them, you might as well forbid your banns. They will be all over the country exclaiming on predestination and marriages made in heaven.’

‘Clara and her father!’ cried Sir Willoughby.

Dr Middleton and his daughter appeared in the circle of shrubs and flowers.

‘Bring her to me, and save me from the polyglot,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, in affright at Dr Middleton’s manner of pouring forth into the ears of the downcast girl.

The leisure he loved that he might debate with his genius upon any next step was denied to Willoughby: he had to place his trust in the skill with which he had sown and prepared Mrs Mountstuart’s understanding to meet the girl – beautiful abhorred that she was! detested darling! thing to squeeze to death and throw to the dust, and mourn over!

He had to risk it; and at an hour when Lady Busshe’s prognostic grievously impressed his intense apprehensiveness of nature.

As it happened that Dr Middleton’s notion of a disagreeable duty in colloquy was to deliver all that he contained, and escape the listening to a syllable of reply, Willoughby withdrew his daughter from him opportunely.

‘Mrs Mountstuart wants you, Clara.’

‘I shall be very happy,’ Clara replied, and put on a new face.

An imperceptible nervous shrinking was met by another force in her bosom, that pushed her to advance without a sign of reluctance. She seemed to glitter.

She was handed to Mrs Mountstuart.

Dr Middleton laid his hand over Willoughby’s shoulder, retiring on a bow before the great lady of the district. He blew and said: ‘An opposition of female instincts to masculine intellect necessarily creates a corresponding antagonism of intellect to instinct.’

‘Her answer, sir? Her reasons? Has she named any?’

‘The cat,’ said Dr Middleton, taking breath for a sentence, ‘that humps her back in the figure of the letter H, or a Chinese bridge has given the dog her answer and her reasons, we may presume: but he that undertakes to translate them into human speech might likewise venture to propose an addition to the alphabet and a continuation of Homer. The one performance would be not more wonderful than the other. Daughters, Willoughby, daughters! Above most human peccancies, I do abhor a breach of faith. She will not be guilty of that. I demand a cheerful fulfilment of a pledge: and I sigh to think that I cannot count on it

without administering a lecture.'

'She will soon be my care, sir.'

'She shall be. Why, she is as good as married. She is at the altar. She is in her house. She is – why, where is she not? She has entered the sanctuary. She is out of the market. This maenad shriek for freedom would happily entitle her to the Republican cap – the Phrygian – in a revolutionary Parisian procession. To me it has no meaning; and but that I cannot credit child of mine with mania, I should be in trepidation of her wits.'

Sir Willoughby's livelier fears were pacified by the information that Clara had simply emitted a cry. Clara had once or twice given him cause for starting and considering whether to think of her sex differently or condemningly of her, yet he could not deem her capable of fully unbosoming herself even to him, and under excitement. His idea of the cowardice of girls combined with his ideal of a waxwork sex to persuade him that though they are often (he had experienced it) wantonly desperate in their acts, their tongues are curbed by rosy prudency. And this was in his favour. For if she proved speechless and stupid with Mrs Mountstuart, the lady would turn her over, and beat her flat, beat her angular, in fine, turn her to any shape, despising her, and cordially believe him to be the model gentleman of Christendom. She would fill in the outlines he had sketched to her of a picture that he had small pride in by comparison with his early vision of a fortune-favoured, triumphing squire, whose career is like the sun's intelligibly lordly to all comprehensions. Not like your model

gentleman, that has to be expounded – a thing for abstract esteem! However, it was the choice left to him. And an alternative was enfolded in that. Mrs Mountstuart's model gentleman could marry either one of two women, throwing the other overboard. He was bound to marry: he was bound to take to himself one of them: and whichever one he selected would cast a lustre on his reputation. At least she would rescue him from from the claws of Lady Busshe, and her owl's hoot of 'Willow Pattern', and her hag's shriek of 'twice jilted'. That flying infant Willoughby – his unprotected little incorporeal omnipresent Self (not thought of so much as passionately felt for) – would not be scoffed at as the luckless with women. A fall indeed from his original conception of his name of fame abroad! But Willoughby had the high consolation of knowing that others have fallen lower. There is the fate of the devils to comfort us, if we are driven hard. *For one of your pangs another bosom is racked by ten*, we read in the solacing Book.

With all these nice calculations at work, Willoughby stood above himself, contemplating his active machinery, which he could partly criticize but could not stop, in a singular wonderment at the aims and schemes and tremours of one who was handsome, manly, acceptable in the world's eyes: and had he not loved himself most heartily he would have been divided to the extent of repudiating that urgent and excited half of his being, whose motions appeared as those of a body of insects perpetually erecting and repairing a structure of extraordinary pettiness. He loved himself too seriously to dwell on the division for more than a minute or so. But having seen it, and for the first time, as he believed, his passion for the woman causing it became surcharged with bitterness, atrabiliar.

A glance behind him, as he walked away with Dr Middleton, showed Clara, cunning creature that she was, airily executing her malicious graces in the preliminary courtesies with Mrs Mountstuart.

CHAPTER 35

Miss Middleton and Mrs Mountstuart

'SIT beside me, fair Middleton,' said the great lady.

'Gladly,' said Clara, bowing to her title.

'I want to sound you, my dear.'

Clara presented an open countenance with a dim interrogation on the forehead. 'Yes?' she said, submissively.

'You were one of my bright faces last night. I was in love with you. Delicate vessels ring sweetly to a finger-nail, and if the wit is true, you answer to it; that I can see, and that is what I like. Most of the people one has at a table are drums. A ruba-dub-dub on them is the only way to get a sound. When they can be persuaded to do it upon one another, they call it conversation.'

‘Colonel De Craye was very funny.’

‘Funny, and witty too.’

‘But never spiteful.’

‘These Irish or half Irishmen are my taste. If they’re not politicians, mind; I mean Irish gentlemen. I will never have another dinner-party without one. Our men’s tempers are uncertain. You can’t get them to forget themselves. And when the wine is in them the nature comes out, and they must be buffeting, and upstart politics, and good-bye to harmony! My husband, I am sorry to say, was one of those who have a long account of ruined dinners against them. I have seen him and his friends red as the roast and white as the boiled with wrath on a popular topic they had excited themselves over, intrinsically not worth a snap of the fingers. In London!’ exclaimed Mrs Mountstuart, to aggravate the charge against her lord in the Shades. ‘But town or country, the table should be sacred. I have heard women say it is a plot on the side of the men to teach us our littleness. I don’t believe they have a plot. It would be to compliment them on a talent. I believe they fall upon one another blindly, simply because they are full: which is, we are told, the preparation for the fighting Englishman. They cannot eat and keep a truce. Did you notice that dreadful Mr Capes?’

‘The gentleman who frequently contradicted papa? But Colonel De Craye was good enough to relieve us.’

‘How, my dear?’

‘You did not hear him? He took advantage of an interval when Mr Capes was breathing after a paean to his friend, the Governor – I think – of one of the Presidencies, to say to the lady beside him: “He was a wonderful administrator and great logician; he married an Anglo-Indian widow, and soon after published a pamphlet in favour of Suttee.” ’

‘And what did the lady say?’

‘She said: “Oh!” ’

‘Hark at her! And was it heard?’

‘Mr Capes granted the widow, but declared he had never seen the pamphlet in favour of Suttee, and disbelieved in it. He insisted that it was to be named Sati. He was vehement.’

‘Now I do remember: – which must have delighted the colonel. And Mr Capes retired from the front upon a repetition of “in toto, in toto”. As if “in toto” were the language of a dinner-table! But what will ever teach these men? Must we import Frenchmen to give them an example in the art of conversation, as their grandfathers brought over marquises to instruct them in salads? And our young men too! Women have to take to the hunting-field to be able to talk with them, and be on a par with their grooms. Now, there was Willoughby Patterne, a prince among them formerly. Now, did you observe him last night? did you notice how, instead of conversing, instead of assisting me – as he was bound to do doubly owing to the defection of Vernon Whitford: a thing I don’t yet comprehend – there he sat sharpening his lower lip for cutting remarks. And at my best man! at Colonel De

Craye! If he had attacked Mr Capes, with his Governor of Bomby, as the man pronounces it, or Colonel Wildjohn and his Protestant Church in Danger, or Sir Wilson Pettifer harping on his Monarchical Republic, or any other! No, he preferred to be sarcastic upon friend Horace, and he had the worst of it. Sarcasm is so silly! What is the gain if he has been smart? People forget the epigram and remember the other’s good temper. On that field, my dear, you must make up your mind to be beaten by “friend Horace”. I have my prejudices and I have my prepossessions, but I love good temper, and I love wit, and when I see a man possessed of both, I set my cap at him, and there’s my flat confession, and highly unfeminine it is.’

‘Not at all!’ cried Clara.

‘We are one, then.’

Clara put up a mouth empty of words: she was quite one with her. Mrs Mountstuart pressed her hand. ‘When one does get intimate with a dainty rogue!’ she said. ‘You forgive me all that, for I could vow that Willoughby has betrayed me.’

Clara looked soft, kind, bright, in turns, and clouded instantly when the lady resumed: ‘A friend of my own sex, and young, and a close neighbour, is just what I would have prayed for. And I’ll excuse you, my dear, for not being so anxious about the friendship of an old woman. But I shall be of use to you, you will find. In the first place, I never tap for secrets. In the second, I keep them. Thirdly, I have some power. And fourth, every young married woman has need of a friend like me. Yes, and Lady Patterne heading all the county will be the stronger for my backing. You don’t look so mighty well pleased, my dear. Speak out.’

‘Dear Mrs Mountstuart!’

‘I tell you, I am very fond of Willoughby, but I saw the faults of the boy and see the man’s. He has the pride of a king, and it’s a pity if you offend it. He is prodigal in generosity, but he can’t forgive. As to his

own errors, you must be blind to them as a Saint. The secret of him is, that he is one of those

excessively civilized creatures who aim at perfection: and I think he ought to be supported in his conceit of having attained it; for the more men of that class, the greater our influence. He excels in manly sports, because he won't be excelled in anything, but as men don't comprehend his fineness, he comes to us; and his wife must manage him by that key. You look down at the idea of managing. It has to be done. One thing you may be assured of, he will be proud of you. His wife won't be very much enamoured of herself if she is not the happiest woman in the world. You will have the best horses, the best dresses, the finest jewels in England; and an incomparable cook. The house will be changed the moment you enter it as Lady Patterne. And, my dear, just where he is, with all his graces, deficient of attraction, yours will tell. The sort of Othello he would make, or Leontes, I don't know, and none of us ever needs to know. My impression is, that if even a shadow of a suspicion flitted across him, he is a sort of man to double-dye himself in guilt by way of vengeance in

anticipation of an imagined offence. Not uncommon with men. I have heard strange stories of them: and so will you in your time to come, but not from me. No young woman shall ever be the sourer for having been my friend. One word of advice now we are on the topic: never play at counter-strokes with him. He will be certain to out-stroke you, and you will be driven further than you meant to go. They say we beat men at that game; and so we do, at the cost of beating ourselves. And if once we are started, it is a race-course ending on a precipice – over goes the winner. We must be moderately slavish to keep our place; which is given us in appearance; but appearances make up a remarkably large part of life, and far the most comfortable, so long as we are discreet at the right moment. He is a man whose pride, when hurt, would run his wife to perdition to solace it. If he married a troublesome widow, his pamphlet on Suttee would be out within the year. Vernon Whitford would receive instructions about it the first frosty moon. You like Miss Dale?'

'I think I like her better than she likes me,' said Clara.

'Have you never warmed together?'

'I have tried it. She is not one bit to blame. I can see how it is that she misunderstands me: or justly condemns me, perhaps I should say.'

'The hero of two women must die and be wept over in common before they can appreciate one another. You are not cold?'

'No.'

'You shuddered, my dear.'

'Did I?'

'I do sometimes. Feet will be walking over one's grave, wherever it lies. Be sure of this: Willoughby Patterne is a man of unimpeachable honour.'

'I do not doubt it.'

'He means to be devoted to you. He has been accustomed to have women hanging around him like votive offerings.'

'I…'

'You cannot: of course not: any one could see that at a glance. You are all the sweeter to me for not being tame. Marriage cures a multitude of indispositions.'

'Oh! Mrs Mountstuart, will you listen to me?'

'Presently. Don't threaten me with confidences. Eloquence is a terrible thing in woman. I suspect, my dear, that we both know as much as could be spoken.'

'You hardly suspect the truth, I fear.'

'Let me tell you one thing about jealous men – when they are not blackamoors married to disobedient daughters. I speak of our civil creature of the drawing-rooms: and lovers, mind, not husbands: two distinct species, married or not: – they're rarely given to jealousy unless they are flighty themselves. The jealousy fixes them. They have only to imagine that we are for some fun likewise and they grow as deferential as my footman, as harmless as the sportsman whose gun has burst. Ah! my fair Middleton, am I pretending to teach you? You have read him his lesson, and my table suffered for it last night, but I bear no rancour.'

'You bewilder me, Mrs Mountstuart.'

'Not if I tell you that you have driven the poor man to try whether it would be possible for him to give you up.'

'I have?'

'Well, and you are successful.'

‘I am?’

‘Jump, my dear!’

‘He will?’

‘When men love stale instead of fresh, withered better than blooming, excellence in the abstract rather than the palpable. With their idle prate of feminine intellect, and a grotto nymph, and a mother of Gracchi! Why, he must think me dazed with admiration of him to talk to me! One listens, you know. And he is one of the men who cast a kind of physical spell on you while he has you by the ear, until you begin to think of it by talking to somebody else. I suppose there are clever people who do see deep into the breast while dialogue is in progress. One reads of them. No, my dear, you have very cleverly managed to show him that it isn’t at all possible: he can’t. And the real cause for alarm, in my humble opinion, is lest your amiable foil should have been a trifle, as he would say, deceived, too much in earnest, led too far. One may reprove him for not being wiser, but men won’t learn without groaning that they are simply weapons taken up to be put down when done with. Leave it to me to compose him. – Willoughby can’t give you up. I’m certain he has tried; his pride has been horridly wounded. You were shrewd, and he has had his lesson. If these little rufflings don’t come before marriage they come after; so it’s not time lost; and it’s good to be able to look back on them. You are very white, my child.’

‘Can you, Mrs Mountstuart, can you think I would be so heartlessly treacherous?’

‘Be honest, fair Middleton, and answer me: Can you say you had not a corner of an idea of producing an effect on Willoughby?’

Clara checked the instinct of her tongue to defend her reddening cheeks, with a sense that she was disintegrating and crumbling, but she wanted this lady for a friend, and she had to submit to the conditions, and be red and silent.

Mrs Mountstuart examined her leisurely.

‘That will do. Conscience blushes. One knows it by the conflagration. Don’t be hard on yourself: there you are in the other extreme. That blush of yours would count with me against any quantity of evidence – all the Crooklyns in the kingdom. You lost your purse.’

‘I discovered that it was lost this morning.’

‘Flitch has been here with it. Willoughby has it. You will ask him for it; he will demand payment: you will be a couple of yards’ length or so of cramoisy: and there ends the episode, nobody killed, only a poor man melancholy-wounded, and I must offer him my hand to mend him, vowing to prove to him that Suttee was properly abolished. Well, and now to business. I said I wanted to sound you. You have been overdone with porcelain. Poor Lady Busshe is in despair at your disappointment. Now, I mean my wedding-present to be to your taste.’

‘Madam!’

‘Who is the madam you are imploring?’

‘Dear Mrs Mountstuart!’

‘Well?’

‘I shall fall in your esteem. Perhaps you will help me. No one else can. I am a prisoner: I am compelled to continue this imposture. Oh, I shun speaking much: you object to it and I dislike it: but I must endeavour to explain to you that I am unworthy of the position you think a proud one.’

‘Tut-tut; we are all unworthy, cross our arms, bow our heads, and accept the honours. Are you playing humble handmaid? What an old organ-tune that is! Well? Give me reasons.’

‘I do not wish to marry.’

‘He’s the great match of the county!’

‘I cannot marry him.’

‘Why, you are at the church door with him! Cannot marry him?’

‘It does not bind me.’

‘The church door is as binding as the altar to an honourable girl. What have you been about? Since I am in for confidences, half ones won’t do. We must have honourable young women as well as men of honour. You can’t imagine he is to be thrown over now, at this hour? What have you against him? come!’

‘I have found that I do not…’

‘What?’

‘Love him.’

Mrs Mountstuart grimaced transiently. ‘That is no answer. The cause!’ she said. ‘What has he done?’

‘Nothing.’

‘And when did you discover this nothing?’

‘By degrees: unknown to myself; suddenly.’

‘Suddenly and by degrees? I suppose it’s useless to ask for a head. But if all this is true, you ought not to be here.’

‘I wish to go; I am unable.’

‘Have you had a scene together?’

‘I have expressed my wish.’

‘In roundabout? – girl’s English?’

‘Quite clearly. Oh, very clearly.’

‘Have you spoken to your father?’

‘I have.’

‘And what does Dr Middleton say?’

‘It is incredible to him.’

‘To me too! I can understand little differences, little whims, caprices: we don’t settle into harness for a tap on the shoulder as a man becomes a knight: but to break and bounce away from an unhappy gentleman at the church door is either madness or it’s one of the things without a name. You think you are quite sure of yourself?’

‘I am so sure, that I look back with regret on the time when I was not.’

‘But you were in love with him.’

‘I was mistaken.’

‘No love?’

‘I have none to give.’

‘Dear me! – Yes, yes, but that tone of sorrowful conviction is often a trick, it’s not new: and I know that assumption of plain sense to pass off a monstrosity.’ Mrs Mountstuart struck her lap. ‘Soh! but I’ve had to rack my brain for it: feminine disgust? You have been hearing imputations of his past life? moral character? No? Circumstances might make him behave unkindly, not unhandsomely: and we have no claim over a man’s past, or it’s too late to assert it. What is the case?’

‘We are quite divided.’

‘Nothing in the way of… nothing green-eyed?’

‘Far from that!’

‘Then name it.’

‘We disagree.’

‘Many a very good agreement is founded on disagreeing. It’s to be regretted that you are not portionless. If you had been, you would have made very little of disagreeing. You are just as much bound in honour as if you had the ring on your finger.’

‘In honour! But I appeal to his, I am no wife for him.’

‘But if he insists, you consent?’

‘I appeal to reason. Is it, madame…’

‘But, I say, if he insists, you consent?’

‘He will insist upon his own misery as well as mine.’

Mrs Mountstuart rocked herself. ‘My poor Sir Willoughby! What a fate! – And I took you for a clever girl! Why, I have been admiring your management of him! And here am I bound to take a lesson from Lady Busshe. My dear good Middleton, don’t let it be said that Lady Busshe saw

deeper than I! I put some little vanity in it, I own: I won’t conceal it. She declares that when she sent her present – I don’t believe her – she had a premonition that it would come back. Surely you won’t justify the extravagances of a woman without common reverence: – for anatomize him as we please to ourselves, he is a splendid man (and I did it chiefly to encourage and come at you). We don’t often behold such a lordly-looking man: so conversable too when he feels at home; a picture of an English gentleman! The very man we want married for our neighbourhood! A woman who can openly talk of expecting him to be twice jilted! You shrink. It is repulsive. It would be incomprehensible: except, of course, to Lady Busshe, who rushed to one of her violent conclusions, and became a prophetess. Conceive a woman’s imagining it could happen twice to the same man! I am not sure she did not send the identical present that arrived and returned once

before: you know, the Durham engagement.

She told me last night she had it back. I watched her listening very suspiciously to Professor Crooklyn. My dear, it is her passion to foretell disasters – her passion! And when they are confirmed, she triumphs, of course. We shall have her domineering over us with sapient nods at every trifle occurring. The county will be unendurable. Unsay it, my Middleton! And don't answer like an oracle because I do all the talking. Pour out to me. You'll soon come to a stop and find the want of reason in the want of words. I assure you that's true. – Let me have a good gaze at you. No,' said Mrs Mountstuart, after posturing herself to peruse Clara's features, 'brains you have; one can see it by the nose and the mouth. I could vow you are the girl I thought you; you have your wits on tiptoe. How of the heart?'

'None,' Clara sighed.

The sigh was partly voluntary, though unforced; as one may with ready sincerity act a character that is our own only through sympathy.

Mrs Mountstuart felt the extra weight in the young lady's falling breath. There was no necessity for a deep sigh over an absence of heart or confession of it. If Clara did not love the man to whom she was betrothed, sighing about it signified –what? some pretence; and a pretence is the cloak of a secret. Girls do not sigh in that way with compassion for the man they have no heart for, unless at the same time they should be oppressed by the knowledge or dread of having a heart for some one else. As a rule, they have no compassion to bestow on him: you might as reasonably expect a soldier to bewail the enemy he strikes in action: they must be very disengaged to have it. And supposing a show of the thing to be exhibited, when it has not been worried out of them, there is a reserve in the background: they are pitying themselves under a mask of decent pity of their wretch.

So ran Mrs Mountstuart's calculations, which were like her suspicion, coarse and broad, not absolutely incorrect, but not of an exact measure with the truth. That pin's head of the truth is rarely hit by design. The search after it of the professionally penetrative in the dark of a bosom may bring it forth by the heavy knocking all about the neighbourhood that we call good guessing, but it does not come out clean; other matter adheres to it; and being more it is less than truth. The unadulterate is to be had only by faith in it or by waiting for it.

A lover! thought the sagacious dame. There was no lover: some love there was: or, rather, there was a preparation of the chamber, with no lamp yet lighted.

'Do you positively tell me you have no heart for the position of first lady of the county?' said Mrs Mountstuart.

Clara's reply was firm: 'None whatever.'

'My dear, I will believe you on one condition. Look at me. You have eyes. If you are for mischief, you are armed for it. But how much better, when you have won a prize, to settle down and wear it! Lady Patterne will have entire occupation for her flights and whimsies in leading the county. And the man, surely the man – he behaved badly last night: but a beauty like this –' she pushed a finger at Clara's cheek, and doated a half instant, 'you have the very beauty to break in an ogre's temper. And the man is as governable as he is presentable. You have the beauty the French call – no, it's the beauty of a queen of elves: one sees them lurking about you, one here, one there. Smile – they dance: be doleful – they hang themselves. No, there's not a trace of satanic; at least, not yet. And come, come, my Middleton, the man is a man to be proud of. You can send him into Parliament to wear off his humours. To my thinking, he has a fine style: conscious? I never thought so before last night. I can't guess what has happened to him recently. He was once a young Grand Mon-arque. He was really a superb young English gentleman. Have you been wounding him?'

'It is my misfortune to be obliged to wound him,' said Clara.

'Quite needlessly, my child, for marry him you must.'

Clara's bosom rose: her shoulders rose too, narrowing, and her head fell slight back.

Mrs Mountstuart exclaimed: 'But the scandal! You would never, never think of following the example of that Durham girl? – whether she was provoked to it by jealousy or not. It seems to have gone so astonishingly far with you in a very short time, that one is alarmed as to where you will stop. Your look just now was downright revulsion.'

'I fear it is. It is. I am past my own control. Dear madam, you have my assurance that I will not behave scandalously or dishonourably. What I would entreat of you is to help me. I know this of myself: I am not the best of women. I am impatient, wickedly. I should be no good wife. Feelings like mine teach me unhappy things of myself.'

'Rich, handsome, lordly, influential, brilliant health, fine estates,' Mrs Mountstuart enumerated in petulant accents as there started across her mind some of Sir Willoughby's attributes for the attraction of

the soul of woman. ‘I suppose you wish me to take you in earnest?’

‘I appeal to you for help.’

‘What help?’

‘Persuade him of the folly of pressing me to keep my word.’

‘I will believe you, my dear Middleton, on one condition: – your talk of no heart is nonsense. A change like this, if one is to believe in the change, occurs through the heart, not because there is none. Don’t you see that? But if you want me for a friend, you must not sham stupid. It’s bad enough in itself: the imitation’s horrid. You have to be honest with me, and answer me right out. You came here on this visit intending to marry Willoughby Patterne.’

‘Yes.’

‘And *gradually* you *suddenly* discovered, since you came here, that you did not intend it, if you could find a means of avoiding it.’

‘Oh, madam, yes, it is true.’

‘Now comes the test. And, my lovely Middleton, your flaming cheeks won’t suffice for me this time. The old serpent can blush like an innocent maid on occasion. You are to speak, and you are to tell me in six words why that was: and don’t waste one on “madam”, or “Oh! Mrs Mountstuart!” Why did you change?’

‘I came – When I came I was in some doubt. Indeed I speak the truth. I found I could not give him the admiration he has, I dare say, a right to expect. I turned – it surprised me; it surprises me now. But so completely! So that to think of marrying him is…’

‘Defer the simile,’ Mrs Mountstuart interposed. ‘If you hit on a clever one, you will never get the better of it. Now, by just as much as you have outstripped my limitation of words to you, you show me you are dishonest.’

‘I could make a vow.’

‘You would forswear yourself.’

‘Will you help me?’

‘If you are perfectly ingenuous, I may try.’

‘Dear lady, what more can I say?’

‘It may be difficult. You can reply to a catechism.’

‘I shall have your help?’

‘Well, yes; though I don’t like stipulations between friends. There is no man living to whom you could willingly give your hand? That is my question. I cannot possibly take a step unless I know. Reply briefly: there is or there is not.’

Clara sat back with bated breath, mentally taking the leap into the abyss, realizing it, and the cold prudence of abstention, and the delirium of the confession. Was there such a man? It resembled freedom to think there was: to avow it promised freedom.

‘Oh, Mrs Mountstuart!’

‘Well?’

‘You will help me?’

‘Upon my word, I shall begin to doubt your desire for it.’

‘*Willingly* give my hand, madam?’

‘For shame! And with wits like yours, can’t you perceive where hesitation in answering such a question lands you?’

‘Dearest lady, will you give me your hand? may I whisper?’

‘You need not whisper; I won’t look.’

Clara’s voice trembled on a tense chord.

‘There is one… compared with him I feel my insignificance. If I could aid him!’

‘What necessity have you to tell me more than that there is one?’

‘Ah, madam, it is different: not as you imagine. You bid me be scrupulously truthful: I am: I wish you to know the different kind of feeling it is from what might be suspected from… a confession. To give my hand, is beyond any thought I have ever encouraged. If you had asked me whether there is one whom I admire – yes, I do. I cannot help admiring a beautiful and brave self-denying nature. It is one whom you must pity, and to pity casts you beneath him: for you pity him because it is his nobleness that has been the enemy of his fortunes. He lives for others.’

Her voice was musically thrilling in that low muted tone of the very heart, impossible to deride or disbelieve.

Mrs Mountstuart set her head nodding on springs.

'Is he clever?'

'Very.'

'He talks well?'

'Yes.'

'Handsome?'

'He might be thought so.'

'Witty?'

'I think he is.'

'Gay, cheerful?'

'In his manner.'

'Why, the man would be a mountebank if he adopted any other. And poor?'

'He is not wealthy.'

Mrs Mountstuart preserved a lengthened silence, but nipped Clara's fingers once or twice to reassure her without approving. 'Of course he's poor,' she said at last; 'directly the reverse of what you *could* have, it *must* be. Well, my fair Middleton, I can't say you have been dishonest. I'll help you as far as I'm able. How, it is quite impossible to tell. We're in the mire. The best way seems to me to get this pitiable angel to cut some ridiculous capers and present you another view of him. I don't believe in his innocence. He knew you to be a plighted woman.'

'He has not once by word or sign hinted a disloyalty.'

'Then how do you know…'

'I do not know.'

'He is not the cause of your wish to break your engagement?'

'No.'

'Then you have succeeded in just telling me nothing. What is?'

'Ah! madam!'

'You would break your engagement purely because the admirable creature is in existence?'

Clara shook her head: she could not say she was dizzy. She had spoken out more than she had ever spoken to herself: and in doing so she had cast herself a step beyond the line she dared to contemplate.

'I won't detain you any longer,' said Mrs Mountstuart. 'The more we learn, the more we are taught that we are not so wise as we thought we were. I have to go to school to Lady Busshe! I really took you for a very clever girl. If you change again, you will notify the important circumstance to me, I trust.'

'I will,' said Clara, and no violent declaration of the impossibility of her changeing again would have had such an effect on her hearer.

Mrs Mountstuart scanned her face for a new reading of it to match with her later impressions.

'I am to do as I please with the knowledge I have gained?'

'I am utterly in your hands, madam.'

'I have not meant to be unkind.'

'You have not been unkind; I could embrace you.'

'I am rather too shattered, and kissing won't put me together. I laughed at Lady Busshe! No wonder you went off like a rocket with a disappointing bouquet when I told you you had been successful with poor Sir Willoughby and he could not give you up. I noticed that. A woman like Lady Busshe, always prying for the lamentable, would have required no further enlightenment. Has he a temper?'

Clara did not ask her to signalize the person thus abruptly obtruded.

'He has faults,' she said.

'There's an end to Sir Willoughby, then! Though I don't say he will give you up even when he hears the worst, if he must hear it, as for his own sake he should. And I won't say he ought to give you up. He'll be the pitiable angel if he does. For you – but you don't deserve compliments; they would be immoral. You have behaved badly, badly, badly. I have never had such a right-about-face in my life. You will deserve the stigma: you will be notorious: you will be called Number Two. Think of that! Not even original! We will break the conference, or I shall twaddle to extinction. I think I heard the luncheon bell.'

‘It rang.’

‘You don’t look fit for company, but you had better come.’

‘Oh, yes; every day it’s the same.’

‘Whether you’re in my hands or I’m in yours, we’re a couple of arch-conspirators against the peace of the family whose table we’re sitting at, and the more we rattle the viler we are, but we must do it to ease our minds.’

Mrs Mountstuart spread the skirts of her voluminous dress, remarking further: ‘At a certain age our teachers are young people: we learn by looking backward. It speaks highly for me that I have not called you mad. – Full of faults, goodish-looking, not a bad talker, cheerful, poorish; – and she prefers that to this!’ the great lady exclaimed in her reverie while emerging from the circle of shrubs upon a view of the Hall.

Colonel De Craye advanced to her; certainly good-looking, certainly cheerful, by no means a bad talker, nothing of a Croesus, and variegated with faults.

His laughing smile attacked the irresolute hostility of her mien, confident as the sparkle of sunlight in a breeze. The effect of it on herself angered her on behalf of Sir Willoughby’s bride.

‘Good-morning, Mrs Mountstuart; I believe I am the last to greet you.’

‘And how long do you remain here, Colonel De Craye?’

‘I kissed earth when I arrived, like the Norman William, and consequently I’ve an attachment to the soil, ma’am.’

‘You’re not going to take possession of it, I suppose?’

‘A handful would satisfy me.’

‘You play the Conqueror pretty much, I have heard. But property is held more sacred than in the times of the Norman William.’

‘And speaking of property, Miss Middleton, your purse is found,’ he said.

‘I know it is,’ she replied as unaffectedly as Mrs Mountstuart could have desired, though the ingenuous air of the girl incensed her somewhat.

Clara passed on.

‘You restore purses,’ observed Mrs Mountstuart.

Her stress on the word and her look thrilled De Craye; for there had been a long conversation between the young lady and the dame.

‘It was an article that dropped and was not stolen,’ said he.

‘Barely sweet enough to keep, then!’

‘I think I could have felt to it like poor Flitch, the flyman, who was the finder.’

‘If you are conscious of these temptations to appropriate what is not your own, you should quit the neighbourhood.’

‘And do it elsewhere? But that’s not virtuous counsel.’

‘And I’m not counselling in the interests of your virtue, Colonel De Craye.’

‘And I dared for a moment to hope that you were, ma’am,’ he said, ruefully drooping.

They were close to the dining-room window, and Mrs Mountstuart preferred the terminating of a dialogue that did not promise to leave her features the austerely iron cast with which she had commenced it. She was under the spell of gratitude for his behaviour yesterday evening at her dinner-table; she could not be very severe.

CHAPTER 36

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Animated Conversation at a Luncheon-Table

VERNON was crossing the hall to the dining-room as Mrs Mountstuart stepped in. She called to him: ‘Are the champions reconciled?’

He replied: ‘Hardly that, but they have consented to meet at an altar to offer up a victim to the gods in the shape of modern poetic imitations of the classical.’

‘That seems innocent enough. The Professor has not been anxious about his chest?’

‘He recollects his cough now and then.’

‘You must help him to forget it.’

‘Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer are here,’ said Vernon, not supposing it to be a grave announcement until the effect of it on Mrs Mountstuart admonished him.

She dropped her voice: ‘Engage my fair friend for one of your walks the moment we rise from table. You may have to rescue her; but do. I mean it.’

‘She’s a capital walker,’ Vernon remarked in simpleton style.

‘There’s no necessity for any of your pedestrian feats,’ Mrs Mountstuart said, and let him go, turning to Colonel De Craye to pronounce an encomium on him: ‘The most open-minded man I know! Warranted to do perpetual service, and no mischief. If you were all… instead of catching at every prize you covet! Yes, you would have your reward for unselfishness, I assure you. Yes, and where you seek it! That is what none of you men will believe.’

‘When you behold me in your own livery!’ cried the colonel.

‘Do I?’ said she, dallying with a half-formed design to be confidential. ‘How is it one is always tempted to address you in the language of innuendo? I can’t guess.’

‘Except that as a dog doesn’t comprehend good English we naturally talk bad to him.’

The great lady was tickled. Who could help being amused by this man? And after all, if her fair Middleton chose to be a fool there could be no gainsaying her, sorry though poor Sir Willoughby’s friends must feel for him.

She tried not to smile.

‘You are too absurd. Or a baby, you might have added.’

‘I hadn’t the daring.’

‘I’ll tell you what, Colonel De Craye, I shall end by falling in love with you; and without esteeming you, I fear.’

‘The second follows as surely as the flavour upon a draught of Bacchus, if you’ll but toss off the glass, ma’am.’

‘We women, sir, think it should be first.’

‘ ’Tis to transpose the seasons, and give October the blossom and April the apple, and no sweet one! Esteem’s a mellow thing that comes after bloom and fire, like an evening at home; because if it went before it would have no father and couldn’t hope for progeny; for there’d be no nature in the business. So please, ma’am, keep to the original order, and you’ll be nature’s child, and I the most blessed of mankind.’

‘Really, were I fifteen years younger. I am not so certain… I might try and make you harmless.’

‘Draw the teeth of the lamb so long as you pet him!’

‘I challenged you, colonel, and I won’t complain of your pitch. But now lay your wit down beside your candour, and descend to an every-day level with me for a minute.’

‘Is it innuendo?’

‘No; though I daresay it would be easier for you to respond to if it were.’

‘I’m the straightforwardest of men at a word of command.’

‘This is a whisper. Be alert, as you were last night. Shuffle the table well. A little liveliness will do it. I don’t imagine malice, but there’s curiosity, which is often as bad, and not so lightly foiled. We have Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer here.’

‘To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky!’

‘Well, then, can you fence with broomsticks?’

‘I have had a bout with them in my time.’

‘They are terribly direct.’

‘They “give point”, as Napoleon commanded his cavalry to do.’

‘You must help me to ward it.’

‘They will require variety in the conversation.’

‘Constant. You are an angel of intelligence, and if I have the judgeing of you, I’m afraid you’ll be allowed to pass, in spite of the scandal above. Open the door; I don’t unbonnet.’

De Craye threw the door open.

Lady Busshe was at that moment saying, ‘And are we indeed to have you for a neighbour, Dr Middleton?’

The Rev. Doctor's reply was drowned by the new arrivals.

'I thought you had forsaken us,' observed Sir Willoughby to Mrs Mountstuart.

'And run away with Colonel De Craye? I'm too weighty, my dear friend. Besides, I have not looked at the wedding-presents yet.'

'The very object of our call!' exclaimed Lady Culmer.

'I have to confess I am in dire alarm about mine,' Lady Busshe nodded across the table at Clara. 'Oh! you may shake your head, but I would rather hear a rough truth than the most complimentary evasion.'

'How would you define a rough truth, Dr Middleton?' said Mrs Mountstuart.

Like the trained warrior who is ready at all hours for the trumpet to arms, Dr Middleton waked up for judicial allocution in a trice.

'A rough truth, madam, I should define to be that description of truth which is not imparted to mankind without a powerful impregnation of the roughness of the teller.'

'It is a rough truth, ma'am, that the world is composed of fools, and that the exceptions are knaves,' Professor Crooklyn furnished that example avoided by the Rev. Doctor.

'Not to precipitate myself into the jaws of the foregone definition, which strikes me as being as happy as Jonah's whale, that could carry probably the most learned man of his time inside without the necessity of digesting him,' said De Craye, 'a rough truth is a rather strong charge of universal nature for the firing off of a modicum of personal fact.'

'It is a rough truth that Plato is Moses atticizing,' said Vernon to Dr Middleton, to keep the diversion alive.

'And that Aristotle had the globe under his cranium,' rejoined the Rev. Doctor.

'And that the Moderns live on the Ancients.'

'And that not one in ten thousand can refer to the particular treasury he filches.'

'The Art of our days is a revel of rough truth,' remarked Professor Crooklyn.

'And the literature has laboriously mastered the adjective, wherever it may be in relation to the noun,' Dr Middleton added.

'Orson's first appearance at court was in the figure of a rough truth, causing the Maids of Honour, accustomed to Tapestry Adams, astonishment and terror,' said De Craye.

That he might not be left out of the sprightly play, Sir Willoughby levelled a lance at the quintain, smiling on Laetitia. 'In fine, caricature is rough truth.'

She said, 'Is one end of it, and realistic directness is the other.'

He bowed. 'The palm is yours.'

Mrs Mountstuart admired herself as each one trotted forth in turn characteristically, with one exception unaware of the aid which was being rendered to a distressed damsel wretchedly incapable of decent hypocrisy. Her intrepid lead had shown her hand to the colonel and drawn the enemy at a blow.

Sir Willoughby's 'in fine', however, did not please her: still less did his lackadaisical Lothario-like bowing and smiling to Miss Dale: and he perceived it and was hurt. For how, carrying his tremendous load, was he to compete with these unhandicapped men in the game of nonsense she had such a fondness for starting at a table? He was further annoyed to hear Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel Patterne agree together that 'caricature' was the final word of the definition. Relatives should know better than to deliver these awards to us in public.

'Well?' quoth Lady Busshe, expressive of stupefaction at the strange dust she had raised.

'Are they on view, Miss Middleton?' inquired Lady Culmer.

'There's a regiment of us on view and ready for inspection.' Colonel De Craye bowed to her, but she would not be foiled. 'Miss Middleton's admirers are always on view,' said he.

'Are they to be seen?' said Lady Busshe.

Clara made her face a question, with a laudable smoothness.

'The wedding-presents,' Lady Culmer explained.

'No.'

'Otherwise, my dear, we are in danger of duplicating and triplicating and quadruplicating, not at all to the satisfaction of the bride.'

'But there's a worse danger to encounter in the "on view", my lady,' said De Craye; 'and that's the magnetic attraction a display of wedding-presents is sure to have for the ineffable burglar, who must have a nuptial soul in him, for wherever there's that collection on view, he's never a league off. And 'tis said he

knows a lady's dressing-case presented to her on the occasion fifteen years after the event.'

'As many as fifteen?' said Mrs Mountstuart.

'By computation of the police. And if the presents are on view, dogs are of no use, nor bolts, nor bars: – he's worse than Cupid. The only protection to be found, singular as it may be thought, is in a couple of bottles of the oldest Jamaica rum in the British Isles.'

'Rum?' cried Lady Busshe.

'The liquor of the Royal Navy, my lady. And with your permission, I'll relate the tale in proof of it. I had a friend engaged to a young lady, niece of an old sea-captain of the old school, the Benbow school, the wooden leg and pigtail school; a perfectly salt old gentleman with a pickled tongue, and a dash of brine in every deed he committed. He looked rolled over to you by the last wave on the shore, sparkling: he was Neptune's own for humour. And when his present to the bride was opened, sure enough there lay a couple of bottles of the oldest Jamaica rum in the British Isles, born before himself, and his father to boot. 'Tis a fabulous spirit I beg you to believe in, my lady, the sole merit of the story being its portentous veracity. The bottles were tied to make them appear twlns, as they both had the same claim to seniority. And there was a label on them, telling their great age, to maintain their identity. They were in truth a pair of patriarchal bottles rivalling many of the biggest houses in the kingdom for

antiquity. They would have made the donkey that stood between the two bundles of hay look at them with obliquity: supposing him to have, for an animal, a rum taste, and a turn for hilarity. Wonderful old bottles! So, on the label, just over the date, was written large: UNCLE BENJAMIN'S WEDDING PRESENT TO HIS NIECE BESSY. Poor Bessy shed tears of disappointment and indignation enough to float the old gentleman on his native element, ship and all. She vowed it was done curmudgeonly to vex her, because her uncle hated wedding-presents and had grunted at the exhibition of cups and saucers, and this and that beautiful service, and épergnes and inkstands, mirrors, knives and forks, dressing-cases, and the whole mighty category. She protested, she flung herself about, she declared those two ugly bottles should not join the exhibition in the dining-room, where it was laid out for days, and the family ate their meals where they could, on the walls, like flies. Eut there was also Uncle Benjamin's legacy on view, in the distance, so it was ruled against her that the bottles

should have their place. And one fine morning down came the family after a fearful row of the domestics; shouting, screaming, cries for the police, and murder topping all. What did they see? They saw two prodigious burglars extended along the floor, each with one of the twin bottles in his hand, and a remainder of the horror of the midnight hanging about his person like a blown fog, sufficient to frighten them while they kicked him entirely intoxicated. Never was wilder disorder of wedding-presents, and not one lost! – owing, you'll own, to Uncle Benjy's two bottles of ancient Jamaica rum.'

Colonel De Craye concluded with an asseveration of the truth of the story.

'A most provident, far-sighted old sea-captain!' exclaimed Mrs Mountstuart, laughing at Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer.

These ladies chimed in with her gingerly.

'And have you many more clever stories, Colonel De Craye?' said Lady Busshe.

'Ah! my lady, when the tree begins to count its gold 'tis nigh upon bankruptcy.'

'Poetic!' ejaculated Lady Culmer, spying at Miss Middleton's rippled countenance, and noting that she and Sir Willoughby had not interchanged word or look.

'But that in the case of your Patterne Port a bottle of it would outvalue the catalogue of nuptial presents, Willoughby, I would recommend your stationing some such constabulary to keep watch and ward,' said Dr Middleton, as he filled his glass, taking Bordeaux in the middle of the day, under a consciousness of virtue and its reward to come at half-past seven in the evening.

'The rascals would require a dozen of that, sir,' said De Craye.

'Then it is not to be thought of. Indeed one!' Dr Middleton negatived the idea.

'We are no further advanced than when we began,' observed Lady Busshe.

'If we are marked to go by stages,' Mrs Mountstuart assented.

'Why, then, we shall be called old coaches,' remarked the colonel.

'You,' said Lady Culmer, 'have the advantage of us in a closer acquaintance with Miss Middleton. You know her tastes, and how far they have been consulted in the little souvenirs already grouped somewhere, although not yet for inspection. I am at sea. And here is Lady Busshe in deadly alarm. There is plenty of time to effect a change – though we are drawing on rapidly to the fatal day, Miss Middleton. We are, we are very near it. Oh! yes. I am one who thinks that these little affairs should be spoken of openly, without that

ridiculous bourgeois affectation, so that we may be sure of giving satisfaction. It is a transaction like everything else in life. I, for my part, wish to be remembered favourably. I put it as a test of breeding to speak of these things as plain matter-of-fact. You marry; I wish you to have something by you to remind you of me. What shall it be? – useful or ornamental. For an ordinary household the choice is not difficult. But where wealth abounds we are in a dilemma.'

'And with persons of decided tastes,' added Lady Busshe. 'I am really very unhappy,' she protested to Clara.

Sir Willoughby dropped Laetitia; Clara's look of a sedate resolution to preserve silence on the topic of the nuptial gifts made a diversion imperative.

'Your porcelain was exquisitely chosen, and I profess to be a connoisseur,' he said. 'I am poor in Old Saxony, as you know; I can match the country in Sèvres, and my inheritance of China will not easily be matched in the country.'

'You may consider your Dragon vases a present from young Crossjay,' said De Craye.

'How?'

'Hasn't he abstained from breaking them? the capital boy! Porcelain and a boy in the house together is a case of prospective disaster fully equal to Flitch and a fly.'

'You thould understand that my friend Horace – whose wit is in this instance founded on another tale of a boy – brought us a magnificent piece of porcelain, destroyed by the capsizing of his conveyance from the station,' said Sir Willoughby to Lady Busshe.

She and Lady Culmer gave out lamentable Ohs, while Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel Patterne sketched the incident. Then the lady visitors fixed their eyes in united sympathy upon Clara: recovering from which, after a contemplation of marble, Lady Busshe emphasized, 'No, you do not love porcelain, it is evident, Miss Middleton.'

'I am glad to be assured of it,' said Lady Culmer.

'Oh, I know that face: I know that look,' Lady Busshe affected to remark rallyingly: 'it is not the first time I have seen it.'

Sir Willoughby smarted to his marrow. 'We will rout these fancies of an overscrupulous generosity, my dear Lady Busshe.'

Her unwonted breach of delicacy in speaking publicly of her present, and the vulgar persistency of her sticking to the theme, very much perplexed him. And if he mistook her not, she had just alluded to the demoniacal Constantia Durham. It might be that he had mistaken her: he was on guard against his terrible sensitiveness. Nevertheless it was hard to account for this behaviour of a lady greatly his friend and admirer, a lady of birth. And Lady Culmer as well! – likewise a lady of birth. Were they in collusion? had they a suspicion? He turned to Laetitia's face for the antidote to his pain.

'Oh, but you are not one yet, and I shall require two voices to convince me,' Lady Busshe rejoined, after another stare at the marble.

'Lady Busshe, I beg you not to think me ungrateful,' said Clara.

'Fiddle! – gratitude! it is to please your taste, to satisfy *you*. I care for gratitude as little as for flattery.'

'But gratitude is flattering,' said Vernon.

'Now, no metaphysics, Mr Whitford.'

'But do care a bit for flattery, my lady,' said De Craye. ' 'Tis the finest of the Arts; we might call it moral sculpture. Adepts in it can cut their friends to any shape they like by practising it with the requisite skill. I myself, poor hand as I am, have made a man act Solomon by constantly praising his wisdom. He took a sagacious turn at an early period of the dose. He weighed the smallest question of his daily occasions with a deliberation truly oriental. Had I pushed it, he'd have hired a baby and a couple of mothers to squabble over the undivided morsel.'

'I shall hope for a day in London with you,' said Lady Culmer to Clara.

'You did not forget the Queen of Sheba?' said Mrs Mountstuart to De Craye.

'With her appearance, the game has to be resigned to her entirely,' he rejoined.

'That is,' Lady Culmer continued, 'if you do not despise an old woman for your comrade on a shopping excursion.'

'Despise whom we fleece!' exclaimed Dr Middleton. 'Oh, no, Lady Culmer, the sheep is sacred.'

'I am not so sure,' said Vernon.

'In what way, and to what extent, are you not so sure?' said Dr Middleton.

‘The natural tendency is to scorn the fleeced.’

‘I stand for the contrary. Pity, if you like: particularly when they bleat.’

‘This is to assume that makers of gifts are a fleeced people: I demur,’ said Mrs Mountstuart.

‘Madam, we are expected to give; we are incited to give; you have dubbed it the fashion to give; and the person refusing to give, or incapable of giving, may anticipate that he will be regarded as benignly as a sheep of a drooping and flaccid wool by the farmer, who is reminded by the poor beast’s appearance of a strange dog that worried the flock. Even Captain Benjamin, as you have seen, was unable to withstand the demand on him. The hymeneal pair are licensed freebooters levying blackmail on us; survivors of an uncivilized period. But in taking without mercy, I venture to trust that the manners of a happier era instruct them not to scorn us. I apprehend that Mr Whitford has a lower order of latrons in his mind.’

‘Permit me to say, sir, that you have not considered the ignoble aspect of the fleeced,’ said Vernon. ‘I appeal to the ladies: would they not, if they beheld an ostrich walking down a Queen’s Drawing Room, clean-plucked, despise him though they were wearing his plumes?’

‘An extreme supposition, indeed,’ said Dr Middleton, frowning over it; ‘scarcely legitimately to be suggested.’

‘I think it fair, sir, as an instance.’

‘Has the circumstance occurred, I would ask?’

‘In life? a thousand times.’

‘I fear so,’ said Mrs Mountstuart.

Lady Busshe showed symptoms of a desire to leave a profitless table.

Vernon started up, glancing at the window.

‘Did you see Crossjay?’ he said to Clara.

‘No; I must, if he is there,’ said she.

She made her way out, Vernon after her. They both had the excuse.

‘Which way did the poor boy go?’ she asked him.

‘I have not the slightest idea,’ he replied. ‘But put on your bonnet, if ou would escape that pair of inquisitors.’

‘Mr Whitford, what humiliation!’

‘I suspect you do not feel it the most, and the end of it can’t be remote,’ said he.

Thus it happened that when Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer quitted the dining-room, Miss Middleton had spirited herself away from summoning voice and messenger.

Sir Willoughby apologized for her absence. ‘If I could be jealous, it would be of that boy Crossjay.’

‘You are an excellent man, and the best of cousins,’ was Lady Busshe’s enigmatical answer.

The exceedingly lively conversation at his table was lauded by Lady Culmer.

‘Though,’ said she, ‘what it all meant, and what was the drift of it, I couldn’t tell to save my life. Is it every day the same with you here?’

‘Very much.’

‘How you must enjoy a spell of dulness!’

‘If you said simplicity and not talking for effect! I generally cast anchor by Laetitia Dale.’

‘Ah!’ Lady Busshe coughed. ‘But the fact is, Mrs Mountstuart is made for cleverness!’

‘I think, my lady, Laetitia Dale is to the full as clever as any of the stars Mrs Mountstuart assembles, or I.’

‘Talkative cleverness, I mean.’

‘In conversation as well. Perhaps you have not yet given her a chance.’

‘Yes, yes, she is clever, of course, poor dear. She is looking better too.’

‘Handsome, I thought,’ said Lady Culmer.

‘She varies,’ observed Sir Willoughby.

The ladies took seat in their carriage and fell at once into a close-bonnet colloquy. Not a single allusion had they made to the wedding-presents after leaving the luncheon-table. The cause of their visit was obvious.

CHAPTER 37

⌘⌘⌘⌘

Contains Clever Fencing and Intimations of the Need for It

THAT woman, Lady Busshe, had predicted, after the event, Constantia Durham's defection. She had also, subsequent to Willoughby's departure on his travels, uttered sceptical things concerning his rooted attachment to Laetitia Dale. In her bitter vulgarity, that beaten rival of Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson for the leadership of the county had taken his nose for a melancholy prognostic of his fortunes; she had recently played on his name: she had spoken the hideous English of his fate. Little as she knew, she was alive to the worst interpretation of appearances. No other eulogy occurred to her now than to call him the best of cousins, because Vernon Whitford was housed and clothed and fed by him. She had nothing else to say for a man she thought luckless! She was a woman barren of wit, stripped of style, but she was wealthy and a gossip – a forge of showering sparks – and she carried Lady Culmer with her. The two had driven from his house to spread the malignant rumour abroad; already they blew the biting world on his raw wound. Neither of them was like Mrs Mountstuart, a witty woman, who could be hoodwinked; they were dull women, who steadily kept on their own scent of the fact, and the only way to confound such inveterate forces was to be ahead of them, and seize and transform the expected fact, and astonish them, when they came up to him, with a totally unanticipated fact.

'You see, you were in error, ladies.'

'And so we were, Sir Willoughby, and we acknowledge it. We never could have guessed *that*!'

Thus the phantom couple in the future delivered themselves, as well they might at the revelation. He could run far ahead.

Ay, but to combat these dolts, facts had to be encountered, deeds done, in groaning earnest. These representatives of the pig-sconces of the population judged by circumstances: airy shows and seems had no effect on them. Dexterity of fence was thrown away.

A flying peep at the remorseless might of dulness in compelling us to a concrete performance counter to our inclinations, if we would deceive its terrible instinct, gave Willoughby for a moment the survey of a sage. His intensity of personal feeling struck so vivid an illumination of mankind at intervals that he would have been individually wise, had he not been moved by the source of his accurate perceptions to a personal feeling of opposition to his own sagacity. He loathed and he despised the vision, so his mind had no benefit of it, though he himself was whipped along. He chose rather (and the choice is open to us all) to be flattered by the distinction it revealed between himself and mankind.

But if he was not as others were, why was he discomfited, solicitous, miserable? To think that it should be so, ran dead against his conqueror's theories wherein he had been trained, which, so long as he gained success awarded success to native merit, grandeur to the grand in soul, as light kindles light: nature presents the example. His early training, his bright beginning of life, had taught him to look to earth's principal fruits as his natural portion, and it was owing to a girl that he stood a mark for tongues, naked, wincing at the possible malignity of a pair of harridans. Why not whistle the girl away?

Why, then he would be free to enjoy, careless, younger than his youth in the rebound to happiness!

And then would his nostrils begin to lift and sniff at the creeping up of a thick pestiferous vapour. Then in that volume of stench would he discern the sullen yellow eye of malice. A malarious earth would hunt him all over it. The breath of the world, the world's view of him, was partly his vital breath, his view of himself. The ancestry of the tortured man had bequeathed him this condition of high civilization among their other bequests. Your withered contracted Egoists of the hut and the grot reck not of public opinion; they crave but for liberty and leisure to scratch themselves and soothe an excessive scratch. Willoughby was expansive, a blooming one, born to look down upon a tributary world, and to exult in being looked to. Do we wonder at his consternation in the prospect of that world's blowing foul on him? Princes have their obligations to teach them they are mortal, and the brilliant heir of a tributary world is equally enchained by the homage it brings him; – more, inasmuch as it is immaterial, elusive, not gathered by the tax, and he cannot capitally punish the treasonable recusants. Still must he be brilliant; he must court his people. He must ever, both in his reputation and his person, aching though he be, show them a face and a leg.

The wounded gentleman shut himself up in his laboratory, where he could stride to and fro, and stretch out his arms for physical relief, secure from observation of his fantastical shapes, under the idea that he was meditating. There was perhaps enough to make him fancy it in the heavy fire of shots exchanged between his nerves and the situation; there were notable flashes. He would not avow that he was in an agony: it was merely a desire for exercise.

Quintessence of worldliness, Mrs Mountstuart appeared through his farthest window, swinging her skirts on a turn at the end of the lawn, with Horace De Craye smirking beside her. And the woman's vaunted penetration was unable to detect the histrionic Irishism of the fellow. Or she liked him for his acting and nonsense; nor she only. The voluble beast was created to snare women. Willoughby became smitten with an adoration of stedfastness in women. The incarnation of that divine quality crossed his eyes. She was clad in beauty.

A horrible nondescript convulsion composed of yawn and groan drove him to his instruments, to avert a renewal of the shock; and while arranging and fixing them for their unwonted task, he compared himself advantageously with men like Vernon and De Craye, and others of the county, his fellows in the hunting-field and on the Magistrate's bench, who neither understood nor cared for solid work, beneficial practical work, the work of Science.

He was obliged to relinquish it: his hand shook.

'Experiments will not advance much at this rate,' he said, casting the noxious retardation on his enemies.

It was not to be contested that he must speak with Mrs Mountstuart, however he might shrink from the trial of his facial muscles. Her not coming to him seemed ominous: nor was her behaviour at the luncheon-table quite obscure. She had evidently instigated the gentlemen to cross and counter-chatter Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer. For what purpose?

Clara's features gave the answer.

They were implacable. And he could be the same.

In the solitude of his room he cried right out: 'I swear it, I will never yield her to Horace De Craye! She shall feel some of my torments, and try to get the better of them by knowing she deserves them.' He had spoken it, and it was an oath upon the record.

Desire to do her intolerable hurt became an ecstasy in his veins, and produced another stretching fit that terminated in a violent shake of the body and limbs; during which he was a spectacle for Mrs Mountstuart at one of the windows. He laughed as he went to her, saying: 'No, no work to-day; it won't be done, positively refuses.'

'I am taking the Professor away,' said she; 'he is fidgety about the cold he caught.'

Sir Willoughby stepped out to her. 'I was trying at a bit of work for an hour, not to be idle all day.'

'You work in that den of yours every day?'

'Never less than an hour, if I can snatch it.'

'It is a wonderful resource!'

The remark set him throbbing and thinking that a pro longation of his crisis exposed him to the approaches of some organic malady, possibly heart-disease.

'A habit,' he said. 'In there I throw off the world.'

'We shall see some results in due time.'

'I promise none: I like to be abreast of the real knowledge of my day, that is all.'

'And a pearl among country gentlemen!'

'In your gracious consideration, my dear lady. Generally speaking, it would be more advisable to become a chatterer and keep an anecdotal note-book. I could not do it, simply because I could not live with my own emptiness for the sake of making an occasional display of fireworks. I aim at solidity. It is a narrow aim, no doubt; not much appreciated.'

'Laetitia Dale appreciates it.'

A smile of enforced ruefulness, like a leaf curling in heat, wrinkled his mouth.

Why did she not speak of her conversation with Clara?

'Have they caught Crossjay?' he said.

'Apparently they are giving chase to him.'

The likelihood was, that Clara had been overcome by timidity.

'Must you leave us?'

'I think it prudent to take Professor Crooklyn away.'

'He still…'

'The extraordinary resemblance!'

'A word aside to Dr Middleton will dispel that.'

'You are thoroughly good.'

This hateful encomium of commiseration transfixed him. Then she knew of his calamity!

‘Philosophical,’ he said, ‘would be the proper term, I think.’

‘Colonel De Craye, by the way, promises me a visit when he leaves you.’

‘To-morrow?’

‘The earlier the better. He is too captivating; he is delightful. He won me in five minutes. I don’t accuse him. Nature gifted him to cast the spell. We are weak women, Sir Willoughby.’

She knew!

‘Like to like: the witty to the witty, ma’am.’

‘You won’t compliment me with a little bit of jealousy?’

‘I forbear from complimenting *him*.’

‘Be philosophical, of course, if you have the philosophy.’

‘I pretend to it. Probably I suppose myself to succeed because I have no great requirement of it; I cannot say. We are riddles to ourselves.’

Mrs Mountstuart pricked the turf with the point of her parasol. She looked down and she looked up.

‘Well?’ said he to her eyes.

‘Well, and where is Laetitia Dale?’

He turned about to show his face elsewhere.

When he fronted her again, she looked very fixedly, and set her head shaking.

‘It will not do, my dear Sir Willoughby!’

‘What?’

‘It.’

‘I never could solve enigmas.’

‘Playing ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum, then. Things have gone far. All parties would be happier for an excursion. Send her home.’

‘Laetitia? I can’t part with her.’

Mrs Mountstuart put a tooth on her under lip as her head renewed its brushing negative.

‘In what way can it be hurtful that she should be here, ma’am?’ he ventured to persist.

‘Think.’

‘She is proof.’

‘Twice!’

The word was big artillery. He tried the affectation of a staring stupidity. She might have seen his heart thump, and he quitted the mask for an agreeable grimace.

‘She is inaccessible. She is my friend. I guarantee her, on my honour. Have no fear for her. I beg you to have confidence in me. I would perish rather. No soul on earth is to be compared with her.’

Mrs Mountstuart repeated ‘Twice!’

The low monosyllable, musically spoken in the same tone of warning of a gentle ghost, rolled a thunder that maddened him, but he dared not take it up to fight against it on plain terms.

‘Is it for my sake?’ he said.

‘It will not do, Sir Willoughby.’

She spurred him to a frenzy.

‘My dear Mrs Mountstuart, you have been listening to tales. I am not a tyrant. I am one of the most easy-going of men. Let us preserve the forms due to society: I say no more. As for poor old Vernon, people call me a good sort of cousin; I should like to see him comfortably married; decently married this time. I have proposed to contribute to his establishment. I mention it to show that the case has been practically considered. He has had a tolerably souring experience of the state; he might be inclined if, say, you took him in hand, for another venture. It’s a demoralizing lottery. However, government sanctions it.’

‘But, Sir Willoughby, what is the use of my taking him in hand when, as you tell me, Laetitia Dale holds back?’

‘She certainly does.’

‘Then we are talking to no purpose, unless you undertake to melt her.’

He suffered a lurking smile to kindle to some strength of meaning.

‘You are not over-considerate in committing me to such an office.’

‘You are afraid of the danger?’ she all but sneered.

Sharpened by her tone, he said, ‘I have such a love of stedfastness of character, that I should be a poor advocate in the endeavour to break it. And frankly, I know the danger. I saved my honour when I made the attempt: that is all I can say.’

‘Upon my word,’ Mrs Mountstuart threw back her head to let her eyes behold him summarily over their fine aquiline bridge, ‘you have the art of mystification, my good friend.’

‘Abandon the idea of Laetitia Dale.’

‘And marry your cousin Vernon to whom? Where are we?’

‘As I said, ma’am, I am an easy-going man. I really have not a spice of the tyrant in me. An intemperate creature held by the collar may have that notion of me, while pulling to be released as promptly as it entered the noose. But I do strictly and sternly object to the scandal of violent separations, open breaches of solemn engagements, a public rupture. Put it that I am the cause, I will not consent to a violation of decorum. Is that clear? It is just possible for things to be arranged so that all parties may be happy in their way without much hubbub. Mind, it is not I who have willed it so. I am, and I am forced to be, passive. But I will not be obstructive.’

He paused, waving his hand to signify the vanity of the more that might be said.

Some conception of him, dashed by incredulity, excited the lady’s intelligence.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed, ‘you have planted me in the land of conjecture. As my husband used to say, I don’t see light, but I think I see the lynx that does. We won’t discuss it at present. I certainly must be a younger woman than I supposed, for I am learning hard. – Here comes the Professor, buttoned up to the ears, and Dr Middleton flapping in the breeze. There will be a cough, and a footnote referring to the young lady at the station, if we stand together, so please order my carriage.’

‘You found Clara complacent? roguish?’

‘I will call to-morrow. You have simplified my task, Sir Willoughby, very much; that is, assuming that I have not entirely mistaken you. I am so far in the dark that I have to help myself by recollecting how Lady Busshe opposed my view of a certain matter formerly. Scepticism is her forte. It will be the very oddest thing if after all… No, I shall own, romance has not departed. Are you fond of dupes?’

‘I detest the race.’

‘An excellent answer. I could pardon you for it.’ She refrained from adding, ‘If you are making one of me.’

Sir Willoughby went to ring for her carriage.

She knew. That was palpable: Clara had betrayed him. ‘The earlier Colonel De Craye leaves Patterne Hall the better’: she had said that: and, ‘all parties would be happier for an excursion’. She knew the position of things and she guessed the remainder. But what she did not know, and could not divine, was the man who fenced her. He speculated further on the witty and the dull. These latter are the redoubtable body. They will have facts to convince them: they had, he confessed it to himself, precipitated him into the novel sphere of his dark hints to Mrs Mountstuart; from which the utter darkness might allow him to escape, yet it embraced him singularly, and even pleasantly, with the sense of a fact established.

It embraced him even very pleasantly. There was an end to his tortures. He sailed on a tranquil sea, the husband of a stedfast woman – no rogue. The exceeding beauty of stedfastness in women clothed Laetitia in graces Clara could not match. A tried stedfast woman is the one jewel of the sex. She points to her husband like the sunflower; her love illuminates him; she lives in him, for him; she testifies to his worth; she drags the world to his feet; she leads the chorus of his praises; she justifies him in his own esteem. Surely there is not on earth such beauty!

If we have to pass through anguish to discover it and cherish the peace it gives to clasp it, calling it ours, is a full reward.

Deep in his reverie, he said his adieus to Mrs Mountstuart, and strolled up the avenue behind the carriage-wheels, unwilling to meet Laetitia till he had exhausted the fresh savour of the cud of fancy.

Supposing it done! –

It would be generous on his part. It would redound to his credit.

His home would be a fortress, impregnable to tongues. He would have divine security in his home.

One who read and knew and worshipped him would be sitting there star-like: sitting there, awaiting him, his fixed star.

It would be marriage with a mirror, with an echo; marriage with a shining mirror, a choric echo.

It would be marriage with an intellect, with a fine understanding; to make his home a fountain of repeatable wit: to make his dear old Patterne Hall the luminary of the county.

He revolved it as a chant: with anon and anon involuntarily a discordant animadversion on Lady Busshe. His attendant imps heard the angry inward cry.

Forthwith he set about painting Laetitia in delectable human colours, like a miniature of the past century, reserving her ideal figure for his private satisfaction. The world was to bow to her visible beauty, and he gave her enamel and glow, a taller stature, a swimming air, a transcendency that exorcized the image of the old witch who had driven him to this.

The result in him was, that Laetitia became humanly and avowedly beautiful. Her dark eyelashes on the pallor of her cheeks lent their aid to the transformation, which was a necessity to him, so it was performed. He received the waxen impression.

His retinue of imps had a revel. We hear wonders of men, and we see a lifting up of hands in the world. The wonders would be explained, and never a hand need to interject, if the mystifying man were but accompanied by that monkey-eyed confraternity. They spy the heart and its twists.

The heart is the magical gentleman. None of them would follow where there was no heart. The twists of the heart are the comedy.

'*The secret of the heart is its pressing love of self*', says the Book.

By that secret the mystery of the organ is legible: and a comparison of the heart to the mountain rillet is taken up to show us the unbaffled force of the little channel in seeking to swell its volume, strenuously, sinuously, ever in pursuit of self; the busiest as it is the most single-aiming of forces on our earth. And we are directed to the sinuosities for posts of observation chiefly instructive.

Few maintain a stand there. People see, and they rush away to interchange liftings of hands at the sight, instead of patiently studying the phenomenon of energy.

Consequently a man in love with one woman, and in all but absolute consciousness, behind the thinnest of veils, preparing his mind to love another, will be barely credible. The particular hunger of the forceful but adaptable heart is the key of him. Behold the mountain rillet, become a brook, become a torrent, how it inarms a handsome boulder: yet if the stone will not go with it, on it hurries, pursuing self in extension, down to where perchance a dam has been raised of a sufficient depth to enfold and keep it from inordinate restlessness. Laetitia represented this peaceful restraining space in prospect.

But she was a faded young woman. He was aware of it; and systematically looking at himself with her upturned orbs, he accepted her benevolently as a God grateful for worship, and used the divinity she imparted to paint and renovate her. His heart required her so. The heart works the springs of imagination; imagination received its commission from the heart, and was a cunning artist.

Cunning to such a degree of seductive genius that the masterpiece it offered to his contemplation enabled him simultaneously to gaze on Clara and think of Laetitia. Clara came through the park-gates with Vernon, a brilliant girl indeed, and a shallow one: a healthy creature, and an animal; attractive, but capricious, impatient, treacherous, foul; a woman to drag men through the mud. She approached.

CHAPTER 38

In Which We Take a Step to the Centre of Egoism

THEY met; Vernon soon left them.

'You have not seen Crossjay?' Willoughby inquired.

'No,' said Clara. 'Once more I beg you to pardon him. He spoke falsely, owing to his poor boy's idea of chivalry.'

'The chivalry to the sex which commences in lies ends by creating the woman's hero, whom we see about the world and in certain courts of law.'

His ability to silence her was great: she could not reply to speech like that.

'You have,' said he, 'made a confidante of Mrs Mountstuart.'

'Yes.'

'This is your purse.'

'I thank you.'

‘Professor Crooklyn has managed to make your father acquainted with your project. That, I suppose, is the railway-ticket in the fold of the purse. He was assured at the station that you had taken a ticket to London, and would not want the fly.’

‘It is true. I was foolish.’

‘You have had a pleasant walk with Vernon – turning me in and out?’

‘We did not speak of you. You allude to what he would never consent to.’

‘He’s an honest fellow, in his old-fashioned way. He’s a secret old fellow. Does he ever talk about his wife to you?’

Clara dropped her purse, and stooped and picked it up.

‘I know nothing of Mr Whitford’s affairs,’ she said, and she opened the purse and tore to pieces the railway ticket.

‘The story’s a proof that romantic spirits do not furnish the most romantic history. You have the word “chivalry” frequently on your lips. He chivalrously married the daughter of the lodging-house where he resided before I took him. We obtained information of the auspicious union in a newspaper report of Mrs Whitford’s drunkenness and rioting at a London railway terminus – probably the one whither your ticket would have taken you yesterday, for I heard the lady was on her way to us for supplies, the connubial larder being empty.’

‘I am sorry; I am ignorant; I have heard nothing; I know nothing,’ said Clara.

‘You are disgusted. But half the students and authors you hear of marry in that way. And very few have Vernon’s luck.’

‘She had good qualities?’ asked Clara.

Her under lip hung.

It looked like disgust; he begged her not indulge the feeling.

‘Literary men, it is notorious, even with the entry to society, have no taste in women. The housewife is their object. Ladies frighten and would, no doubt, be an annoyance and hindrance to them at home.’

‘You said he was fortunate.’

‘You have a kindness for him.’

‘I respect him.’

‘He is a friendly old fellow in his awkward fashion; honourable, and so forth. But a disreputable alliance of that sort sticks to a man. The world will talk. Yes, he was fortunate so far; he fell into the mire and got out of it. Were he to marry again…’

‘She…’

‘Died. Do not be startled; it was a natural death. She responded to the sole wishes left to his family. He buried the woman, and I received him. I took him on my tour. A second marriage might cover the first: there would be a buzz about the old business: the woman’s relatives write to him still, try to bleed him, I dare say. However, now you understand his gloominess. I don’t imagine he regrets his loss. He probably sentimentalizes, like most men when they are well rid of a burden. You must not think the worse of him.’

‘I do not,’ said Clara.

‘I defend him whenever the matter’s discussed.’

‘I hope you do.’

‘Without approving his folly. I can’t wash him clean.’

They were at the Hall-doors. She waited for any personal communications he might be pleased to make, and as there was none, she ran upstairs to her room.

He had tossed her to Vernon in his mind, not only painlessly, but with a keen acid of satisfaction. The heart is the wizard.

Next he bent his deliberate steps to Laetitia.

The mind was guilty of some hesitation; the feet went forward.

She was working at an embroidery by an open window. Colonel De Craye leaned outside, and Willoughby pardoned her air of demure amusement, on hearing him say: ‘No, I have had one of the pleasantest half-hours of my life, and would rather idle here, if idle you will have it, than employ my faculties on horse-back,’

‘Time is not lost in conversing with Miss Dale,’ said Willoughby.

The light was tender to her complexion where she sat in partial shadow.

De Craye asked whether Crossjay had been caught. Laetitia murmured a kind word for the boy.

Willoughby examined her embroidery.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel appeared.

They invited her to take carriage exercise with them.

Laetitia did not immediately answer, and Willoughby remarked: 'Miss Dale has been reproving Horace for idleness, and I recommend you to enlist him to do duty, while I relieve him here.'

The ladies had but to look at the colonel. He was at their disposal, if they would have him. He was marched to the carriage.

Laetitia plied her threads.

'Colonel De Craye spoke of Crossjay,' she said. 'May I hope you have forgiven the poor boy, Sir Willoughby?'

He replied: 'Plead for him.'

'I wish I had eloquence.'

'In my opinion you have it.'

'If he offends, it is never from meanness. At school, among comrades, he would shine. He is in too strong a light; his feelings and his moral nature are over-excited.'

'That was not the case when he was at home with you.'

'I am severe; I am stern.'

'A Spartan mother!'

'My system of managing a boy would be after that model: except in this: he should always feel that he could obtain forgiveness.'

'Not at the expense of justice?'

'Ah! young creatures are not to be arraigned before the higher Courts. It seems to me perilous to terrify their imaginations. If we do so, are we not likely to produce the very evil we are combating? The alternations for the young should be school and home: and it should be in their hearts to have confidence that forgiveness alternates with discipline. They are of too tender an age for the rigours of the world; we are in danger of hardening them. I prove to you that I am not possessed of eloquence. You encouraged me to speak, Sir Willoughby.'

'You speak wisely, Laetitia.'

'I think it true. Will not you reflect on it? You have only to do so to forgive him. I am growing bold indeed, and shall have to beg forgiveness for myself.'

'You still write? you continue to work with your pen?' said Willoughby.

'A little; a very little.'

'I do not like you to squander yourself, waste yourself, on the public. You are too precious to feed the beast. Giving out incessantly must end by attenuating. Reserve yourself for your friends. Why should they be robbed of so much of you? Is it not reasonable to assume that by lying fallow you would be more enriched for domestic life? Candidly, had I authority I would confiscate your pen: I would "away with that bauble". You will not often find me quoting Cromwell, but his words apply in this instance. I would say rather, that lancet. Perhaps it is the more correct term. It bleeds you, it wastes you. For what? For a breath of fame!'

'I write for money.'

'And there – I would say of another – you subject yourself to the risk of mental degradation. Who knows? – moral! Trafficking the brains for money must bring them to the level of the purchasers in time. I confiscate your pen Laetitia.'

'It will be to confiscate your own gift, Sir Willoughby.'

'Then that proves – will you tell me the date?'

'You sent me a gold pen-holder on my sixteenth birthday.'

'It proves my utter thoughtlessness then, and later. And later!'

He rested an elbow on his knee, and covered his eyes, murmuring in that profound hollow which is haunted by the voice of a contrite past: 'And later!'

The deed could be done. He had come to the conclusion that it could be done, though the effort to harmonize the figure sitting near him, with the artistic figure of his purest pigments, had cost him labour and a blinking of the eyelids. That also could be done. Her pleasant tone, sensible talk, and the light favouring her complexion, helped him in his effort. She was a sober cup; sober and wholesome. Deliriousness is for adolescence. The men who seek intoxicating cups are men who invite their fates.

Curiously, yet as positively as things can be affirmed, the husband of this woman would be able to boast of her virtues and treasures abroad, as he could not – impossible to say why not – boast of a beautiful wife or a blue-stocking wife. One of her merits as a wife would be this extraordinary neutral merit of a character that demanded colour from the marital hand, and would take it.

Laetitia had not to learn that he had much to distress him. Her wonder at his exposure of his grief counteracted a fluttering of vague alarm. She was nervous; she sat in expectation of some burst of regrets or of passion.

'I may hope that you have pardoned Crossjay?' she said.

'My friend,' said he, uncovering his face, 'I am governed by principles. Convince me of an error, I shall not obstinately pursue a premeditated course. But you know me. Men who have not principles to rule their conduct are – well, they are unworthy of a half hour of companionship with you. I will speak to you to-night. I have letters to dispatch. To-night: at twelve: in the room where we spoke last. Or await me in the drawing-room. I have to attend to my guests till late.'

He bowed; he was in a hurry to go.

The deed could be done. It must be done; it was his destiny.

CHAPTER 39

In the Heart of the Egoist

BUT already he had begun to regard the deed as his executioner. He dreaded meeting Clara. The folly of having retained her stood before him. How now to look on her and keep a sane resolution unwavering? She tempted to the insane. Had she been away, he could have walked through the performance composed by the sense of doing a duty to himself; perhaps faintly hating the poor wretch he made happy at last, kind to her in a manner, polite. Clara's presence in the house previous to the deed, and, oh, heaven! after it, threatened his wits. Pride? He had none; he cast it down for her to trample it; he caught it back ere it was trodden on. Yes; he had pride: he had it as a dagger in his breast: his pride was his misery. But he was too proud to submit to misery. 'What I do is right.' He said the words, and rectitude smoothed his path, till the question clamoured for answer: Would the world countenance and endorse his pride in Laetitia? At one time, yes. And now? Clara's beauty ascended, laid a beam on him.

We are on board the labouring vessel of humanity in a storm, when cries and countercries ring out, disorderliness mixes the crew, and the fury of self-preservation divides: this one is for the ship, that one for his life. Clara was the former to him, Laetitia the latter. But what if there might not be greater safety in holding tenaciously to Clara than in casting her off for Laetitia? No, she had done things to set his pride throbbing in the quick. She had gone bleeding about first to one, then to another; she had betrayed him to Vernon, and to Mrs Mountstuart; a look in the eyes of Horace De Craye said, to him as well: to whom not? He might hold to her for vengeance; but that appetite was short-lived in him if it ministered nothing to his purposes. 'I discard all idea of

vengeance,' he said, and thrilled burningly to a smart in his admiration of the man who could be so magnanimous under mortal injury; for the more admirable he, the more pitiable. He drank a drop or two of self-pity like a poison, repelling the assaults of public pity. Clara must be given up. It must be seen by the world that, as he felt, the thing he did was right. Laocoon of his own serpents, he struggled to a certain magnificence of attitude in the muscular net of constrictions he flung around himself. Clara must be given up. Oh, bright Abominable! She must be given up: but not to one whose touch of

her would be darts in the blood of the yielder, snakes in his bed: she must be given up to an extinguisher; to be the second wife of an old-fashioned semi-recluse, disgraced in his first. And were it publicly known that she had been cast off, and had fallen on old Vernon for a refuge, and part in spite, part in shame, part in desperation, part in a fit of good sense under the circumstances, espoused him, her beauty would not influence the world in its judgement. The world would know what to think. As the instinct of self-preservation whispered to Willoughby, the world, were it requisite, might be taught to think what it assuredly would not think if she should be seen tripping to the altar with Horace De Craye. Self-preservation, not vengeance, breathed that whisper. He glanced at her iniquity for a justification of it, without any desire to do her a permanent hurt: he was highly civilized: but with a strong intention to give

her all the benefit of a scandal, supposing a scandal, or ordinary tattle.

'And so he handed her to his cousin and secretary, Vernon Whitford, who opened his mouth and shut his eyes.'

You hear the world? How are we to stop it from chattering? Enough that he had no desire to harm her. Some gentle anticipations of her being tarnished were imperative; they came spontaneously to him; otherwise the radiance of that bright Abominable in loss would have been insufferable; he could not have borne it; he could never have surrendered her.

Moreover, a happy present effect was the result. He conjured up the anticipated chatter and shrug of the world so vividly that her beauty grew hectic with the stain, bereft of its formidable magnetism. He could meet her calmly; he had steeled himself. Purity in women was his principal stipulation, and a woman puffed at, was not the person to cause him tremours.

Consider him indulgently; the Egoist is the Son of Himself. He is likewise the Father. And the son loves the father, the father the son; they reciprocate affection, through the closest of ties; and shall they view behaviour unkindly wounding either of them, not for each other's dear sake abhorring the criminal? They would not injure you, but they cannot consent to see one another suffer or crave in vain. The two rub together in sympathy besides relationship to an intenser one. Are you, without much offending, sacrificed by them, it is on the altar of their mutual love, to filial piety or paternal tenderness: the younger has offered a dainty morsel to the elder, or the elder to the younger. Absorbed in their great example of devotion do they not think of you. They are beautiful.

Yet is it most true that the younger has the passions of youth: whereof will come division between them; and this is a tragic state. They are then pathetic. This was the state of Sir Willoughby lending ear to his elder, until he submitted to bite at the fruit proposed to him – with how wry a mouth the venerable senior chose not to mark. At least, as we perceive, a half of him was ripe of wisdom in his own interests. The cruder half had but to be obedient to the leadership of sagacity for his interests to be secured, and a filial disposition assisted him; painfully indeed; but the same rare quality directed the good gentleman to swallow his pain. That the son should bewail his fate were a dishonour to the sire. He reverenced, and submitted. Thus, to say, consider him indulgently, is too much

an appeal for charity on behalf of one requiring but initial anatomy – a slicing in halves – to exonerate, perchance exalt him. The Egoist is our fountain-head, primeval man: the primitive is born again, the elemental reconstituted. Born again, into new conditions, the primitive may be highly polished of men, and forfeit nothing save the roughness of his original nature. He is not only his own father, he is ours; and he is also our son. We have produced him, he us. Such were we, to such are we returning: not other, sings the poet, than one who toilfully works his shallop against the tide, 'si brachia forte remisit': – let him haply relax the labour of his arms, however high up the stream, and back he goes, 'in pejus', to the early principle of our being, with seeds and

plants, that are as carelessly weighed in the hand and as indiscriminately husbanded as our humanity.[29]

Poets on the other side may be cited for an assurance that the primitive is not the degenerate: rather is he a sign of the indestructibility of the race, of the ancient energy in removing obstacles to individual growth; a sample of what we would be, had we his concentrated power. He is the original innocent, the pure simple. It is we who have fallen; we have melted into Society, diluted our essence, dissolved. He stands in the midst monumentally, a land-mark of the tough and honest old Ages, with the symbolic alphabet of striking arms and running legs, our early language, scrawled over his person, and the glorious first flint and arrow-head for his crest: at once the spectre of the Kitchen-midden and our ripest issue.

But Society is about him. The occasional spectacle of the primitive dangling on a rope has impressed his mind with the strength of his natural enemy: from which uncongenial sight he has turned shuddering hardly less to behold the blast that is blown upon a reputation where one has been disrespectful of the many. By these means, through meditation on the contrast of circumstances in life, a pulse of imagination has begun to stir, and he has entered the upper sphere or circle of spiritual Egoism: he has become the civilized Egoist; primitive still, as sure as man has teeth, but developed in his manner of using them.

Degenerate or not (and there is no just reason to suppose it) Sir Willoughby was a social Egoist, fiercely imaginative in whatsoever concerned him. He had discovered a greater realm than that of the sensual appetites, and he rushed across and around it in his conquering period with an Alexander's pride. On these wind-like journeys he had carried Constantia, subsequently Clara; and however it may have been in the case of Miss Durham, in that of Miss Middleton it is almost certain she caught a glimpse of his interior from sheer fatigue in hearing him discourse of it. What he revealed was not the cause of her sickness: women can bear revelations – they are exciting: but the monotonousness. He slew imagination. There is no direr disaster in love than the death of imagination. He dragged her through the labyrinths of his penetralia, in

his hungry coveting to be loved more and still more, more still, until imagination gave up the ghost, and he talked to her plain hearing like a monster. It must have been that; for the spell of the primitive upon women is masterful up to the time of contact.

'And so he handed her to his cousin and secretary, Vernon Whitford, who opened his mouth and shut his eyes.'

The urgent question was, how it was to be accomplished. Willoughby worked at the subject with all his power of concentration: a power that had often led him to feel and say, that as a barrister, a diplomatist, or a general, he would have won his grades: and granting him a personal interest in the business, he might have achieved eminence: he schemed and fenced remarkably well.

He projected a scene, following expressions of anxiety on account of old Vernon and his future settlement: and then – Clara maintaining her doggedness, to which he was now so accustomed that he could not conceive a change in it – says he: 'If you determine on breaking I give you back your word *on one condition*.' Whereupon she starts: he insists on her promise: she declines: affairs resume their former footing; she frets: she begs for the disclosure: he flatters her by telling her his desire to keep her in the family: she is unilluminated, but strongly moved by curiosity: he philosophizes on marriage – 'What are we? poor creatures! we must get through life as we

can, doing as much good as we can to those we love; and think as you please, I love old Vernon. Am I not giving you the greatest possible proof of it?' She will not see. Then flatly out comes the one condition. That and no other. 'Take Vernon and I release you.' She refuses. Now ensues the debate, all the oratory being with him. 'Is it because of his unfortunate first marriage? You assured me you thought no worse of him,' etc. She declares the proposal revolting. He can distinguish

nothing that should offend her in a proposal to make his cousin happy if she will not him. Irony and sarcasm relieve his emotions, but he convinces her he is dealing plainly and intends generosity. She is confused; she speaks in maiden fashion.

He touches again on Vernon's early escapade. She does not enjoy it. The scene closes with his bidding her reflect on it, and remember the one condition of her release. Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, now reduced to believe that he burns to be free, is then called in for an interview with Clara. His aunts Eleanor and Isabel besieges her. Laetitia in passionate earnest besiege her. Her father is wrought on to besiege her. Finally Vernon is attacked by Willoughby and Mrs Mountstuart: – and here, Willoughby chose to think, was the main difficulty. But the girl has money; she is agreeable; Vernon likes her; she is fond of his 'Alps', they have tastes in common, he likes her father, and in the end he besieges her. Will she yield? De Craye is absent. There is no other way of shunning a marriage she is incomprehensibly but frantically averse to. She is in the toils. Her father will stay at Patterne Hall as long as his host desires it. She hesitates, she is overcome; in spite of a certain nausea due to Vernon's preceding alliance, she yields.

Willoughby revolved the entire drama in Clara's presence It helped him to look on her coolly. Conducting her to the dinner-table, he spoke of Crossjay, not unkindly; and at table, he revolved the set of scenes with a heated animation that took fire from the wine and the face of his friend Horace, while he encouraged Horace to be flowingly Irish. He nipped the fellow good-humouredly once or twice, having never felt so friendly to him since the day of his arrival; but the position of critic is instinctively taken by men who do not flow: and Patterne Port kept Dr Middleton in a benevolent reserve when Willoughby decided that something said by De Craye was not new, and laughingly accused him of failing to consult his anecdotal notebook for the double-cross to his last sprightly sally. 'Your sallies are excellent, Horace, but spare us your Aunt Sallies!' De Craye had no repartee, nor did Dr Middleton challenge a pun. We have only to sharpen our wits to trip your seductive rattler whenever we may choose to think proper; and evidently, if we condescended to it, we could do better than he. The critic who has hatched a witticism is impelled to this opinion. Judging by the smiles of the ladies, they thought so, too.

Shortly before eleven o'clock Dr Middleton made a Spartan stand against the offer of another bottle of Port. The regulation couple of bottles had been consumed in equal partnership, and the Rev. Doctor and his host were free to pay a ceremonial visit to the drawing-room, where they were not expected. A piece of work of the elder ladies, a silken boudoir sofa-rug, was being examined, with high approval of the two younger. Vernon and Colonel De Craye had gone out in search of Crossjay, one to Mr Dale's cottage, the other to call at the head and under-gamekeeper's. They were said to be strolling and smoking, for the night was fine. Willoughby left the room and came back with the key of Crossjay's door in his pocket. He foresaw that the delinquent might be of service to him.

Laetitia and Clara sang together. Laetitia was flushed, Clara pale. At eleven they saluted the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. Willoughby said 'Good-night' to each of them, contrasting as he did so the downcast look of Laetitia with Clara's frigid directness. He divined that they were off to talk over their one object of

common interest, Crossjay. Saluting his aunts, he took up the rug, to celebrate their diligence and taste; and that he might make Dr Middleton impatient for bed, he provoked him to admire it, held it out and laid it out, and caused the courteous old gentleman some confusion in hitting on fresh terms of commendation.

Before midnight the room was empty. Ten minutes later Willoughby paid it a visit, and found it untenanted by the person he had engaged to be there. Vexed by his disappointment, he paced up and down, and chanced abstractedly to catch the rug in his hand; for what purpose, he might well ask himself; admiration of ladies' work, in their absence, was unlikely to occur to him. Nevertheless, the touch of the warm, soft silk was meltingly feminine. A glance at the mantel-piece clock told him Laetitia was twenty minutes behind the hour.

Her remissness might endanger all his plans, alter the whole course of his life. The colours in which he painted her were too lively to last; the madness in his head threatened to subside. Certain it was that he could not be ready a second night for the sacrifice he had been about to perform.

The clock was at the half hour after twelve. He flung the silken thing on the central ottoman, extinguished the lamps, and walked out of the room, charging the absent Laetitia to bear her misfortune with a consciousness of deserving it.

CHAPTER 40

Midnight: Sir Willoughby and Laetitia: with Young Crossjay under a Coverlet

YOUNG Crossjay was a glutton at holidays and never thought of home till it was dark. The close of the day saw him several miles away from the Hall, dubious whether he would not round his numerous adventures by sleeping at an inn; for he had lots of money, and the idea of jumping up in the morning in a strange place was thrilling. Besides, when he was shaken out of sleep by Sir Willoughby, he had been told that he was to go, and not to show his face at Patterne again. On the other hand, Miss Middleton had bidden him come back. There was little question with him which person he should obey: he followed his heart.

Supper at an inn, where he found a company to listen to his adventures, delayed him, and a short cut, intended to make up

for it, lost him his road. He reached the Hall very late, ready to be in love with the horrible pleasure of a night's rest under the stars, if necessary. But a candle burned at one of the back windows. He knocked, and a kitchen-maid let him in. She had a bowl of hot soup prepared for him. Crossjay tried a mouthful to please her. His head dropped over it. She roused him to his feet, and he pitched against her shoulder. The dry air of the kitchen department had proved too much for the tired youngster. Mary, the maid, got him to step as firmly as he was able, and led him by the back-way to the hall, bidding him creep noiselessly to bed. He understood his position in the house, and though he could have gone fast to sleep on the stairs, he took a steady aim at his room and gained the door cat-like. The

door resisted. He was appalled and unstrung in a minute. The door was locked. Crossjay felt as if he were in the presence of Sir Willoughby. He fled on ricketty legs, and had a fall and bumps down half a dozen stairs. A door opened above. He rushed across the hall to the drawing-room, invitingly open, and there staggered in darkness to the ottoman and rolled himself in something sleek and warm, soft as hands of ladies, and redolent of them; so delicious that he hugged the folds about his head and heels. While he was endeavouring to think where he was his legs curled, his eyelids shut, and he was in the thick of the day's adventures, doing yet more wonderful things.

He heard his own name: that was quite certain. He knew that he heard it with his ears, as he pursued the fleetest dreams ever accorded to mortal. It did not mix: it was outside him, and like the danger-pole in the ice, which the skater shooting hither and yonder comes on again, it recurred; and now it marked a point in his career, now it caused him to relax his pace; he began to circle, and whirled closer round it, until, as at a blow, his heart knocked, he tightened himself, thought of bolting, and lay dead-still to throb and hearken.

'Oh! Sir Willoughby,' a voice had said.

The accents were sharp with alarm.

'My friend! my dearest!' was the answer.

'I came to speak of Crossjay.'

‘Will you sit here on the ottoman?’

‘No, I cannot wait. I hoped I had heard Crossjay return. I would rather not sit down. May I entreat you to pardon him when he comes home?’

‘You, and you only, may do so. I permit none else. Of Crossjay to-morrow.’

‘He may be lying in the fields. We are anxious.’

‘The rascal can take pretty good care of himself.’

‘Crossjay is perpetually meeting accidents.’

‘He shall be indemnified if he has had excess of punishment.’

‘I think I will say good-night, Sir Willoughby.’

‘When freely and unreservedly you have given me your hand.’

There was hesitation.

‘To say good-night?’

‘I ask you for your hand.’

‘Good-night, Sir Willoughby.’

‘You do not give it. You are in doubt? Still? What language must I use to convince you? And yet you know me. Who knows me but you? You have always known me. You are my home and my temple. Have you forgotten your verses of the day of my majority?

> “The dawn-star has arisen
> In plenitude of light…”

‘Do not repeat them, pray!’ cried Laetitia, with a gasp.

‘I have repeated them to myself a thousand times: in India, America, Japan: they were like our English skylark, carolling to me.

> “My heart, now burst thy prison
> With proud aërial flight!”

‘Oh, I beg you will not force me to listen to nonsense that I wrote when I was a child. No more of those most foolish lines! If you knew what it is to write and despise one’s writing, you would not distress me. And since you will not speak of Crossjay to-night allow me to retire.’

‘You know me, and therefore you know my contempt for verses, as a rule, Laetitia. But not for yours to me. Why should you call them foolish? They expressed your feelings – hold them sacred. They are something religious to me, not mere poetry. Perhaps the third verse is my favourite…’

‘It will be more than I can bear!’

‘You were in earnest when you wrote them?’

‘I was very young, very enthusiastic, very silly.’

‘You were and are my image of constancy!’

‘It is an error, Sir Willoughby; I am far from being the same.’

‘We are all older, I trust wiser. I am, I will own; much wiser. Wise at last! I offer you my hand.’

She did not reply. ‘I offer you my hand and name, Laetitia.’

No response.

‘You think me bound in honour to another?’

She was mute.

‘I am free. Thank Heaven! I am free to choose my mate – the woman I have always loved! Freely and unreservedly, as I ask you to give your hand, I offer mine. You are the mistress of Patterne Hall; my wife.’

She had not a word.

‘My dearest! do you not rightly understand? The hand I am offering you is disengaged. It is offered to the lady I respect above all others. I have made the discovery that I cannot love without respecting; and as I will not marry without loving, it ensues that I am free – I am yours. At last? – your lips move: tell me the words. *Have always loved*, I said. You carry in your bosom the magnet of constancy, and I, in spite of apparent deviations, declare to you that I have never ceased to be sensible of the attraction. And now there is not an impediment. We two against the world! we are one. Let me confess to an old foible – perfectly youthful, and you will ascribe it to youth:

once I desired to absorb. I mistrusted; that was the reason: I perceive it. You teach me the difference of an alliance with a lady of intellect. The pride I have in you, Laetitia, definitely cures me of that insane passion

– call it an insatiable hunger. I recognize it as a folly of youth. I have, as it were, gone the tour, to come home to you – at last? – and live our manly life of comparative equals. At last, then! But remember that in the younger man you would have had a despot – perhaps a jealous despot. Young men, I assure you, are orientally inclined in their ideas of love. Love gets a bad name from them. We, my Laetitia, do not regard love as a selfishness. If it is, it is the essence of life. At least it is our selfishness rendered beautiful. I talk to you like a man who has found a compatriot in a foreign land. It seems to me that I have not opened my mouth for an age. I certainly have not unlocked my heart. Those who sing for joy are not unintelligible to me. If I had not something in me worth saying I think I should sing. In every sense you reconcile me to men and the world, Laetitia. Why press you to speak? I will be the speaker. As surely as you know me, I know you: and – '

Laetitia burst forth with: 'No!'

'I do not know you?' said he, searchingly mellifluous.

'Hardly.'

'How not?'

'I am changed.'

'In what way?'

'Deeply.'

'Sedater?'

'Materially.'

'Colour will come back: have no fear; I promise it. If you imagine you want renewing *I* have the specific, I, my love, I!'

'Forgive me – will you tell me, Sir Willoughby, whether you have broken with Miss Middleton?'

'Rest satisfied, my dear Laetitia. She is as free as I am. I can do no more than a man of honour should do. She releases me. To-morrow or next day she departs. We, Laetitia, you and I, my love, are home birds. It does not do for the home bird to couple with the migratory. The little imperceptible change you allude to, is nothing. Italy will restore you. I am ready to stake my own health – never yet shaken by a doctor of medicine: – I say medicine advisedly, for there are doctors of divinity who would shake giants: – that an Italian trip will send you back – that I shall bring you home from Italy a blooming bride. You shake your head – despondently? My love, I guarantee it. Cannot I give you colour? Behold! Come to the light, look in the glass.'

'I may redden,' said Laetitia. 'I suppose that is due to the action of the heart. I am changed. Heart, for any other purpose, I have not. I am like you, Sir Willoughby, in this: I could not marry without loving, and I do not know what love is, except that it is an empty dream.'

'Marriage, my dearest…'

'You are mistaken.'

'I will cure you, my Laetitia. Look to me, I am the tonic. It is not common confidence, but conviction. I, my love, I!'

'There is no cure for what I feel, Sir Willoughby.'

'Spare me the formal prefix, I beg. You place your hand in mine, relying on me. I am pledge for the remainder. We end as we began: my request is for your hand – your hand in marriage.'

'I cannot give it.'

'To be my wife!'

'It is an honour; I must decline it.'

'Are you quite well, Laetitia? I propose in the plainest terms I can employ, to make you Lady Patterne – mine.'

'I am compelled to refuse.'

'Why? Refuse? Your reason!'

'The reason has been named.'

He took a stride to inspirit his wits.

'There's a madness comes over women at times, I know. Answer me, Laetitia: – by all the evidence a man can have, I could swear it: – but answer me; you loved me once?'

'I was an exceedingly foolish, romantic girl.'

'You evade my question: I am serious. Oh!' he walked away from her booming a sound of utter repudiation of her present imbecility, and hurrying to her side, said: 'But it was manifest to the whole

world! It was a legend. To love like Laetitia Dale, was a current phrase. You were an example, a light to women: no one was your match for devotion. You were a precious cameo, still gazing! And I was the object. You loved me. You loved me, you belonged to me, you were mine, my possession, my jewel; I was prouder of your constancy than of anything else that I had on earth. It was a part of the order of the universe to me. A doubt of it would have disturbed my creed. Why, good heaven! where are we? Is nothing solid on earth? You loved me!'

'I was childish, indeed.'

'You loved me passionately!'

'Do you insist on shaming me through and through, Sir Willoughby? I have been exposed enough.'

'You cannot blot out the past: it is written, it is recorded. You loved me devotedly, silence is no escape. You loved me.'

'I did.'

'You never loved me, you shallow woman! "I did!" As if there could be a cessation of a love! What are we to reckon on as ours? We prize a woman's love; we guard it jealously, we trust to it, dream of it; *there* is our wealth; there is our talisman! And when we open the casket it has flown! – barren vacuity! – we are poorer than dogs. As well think of keeping a costly wine in potter's clay as love in the heart of a woman! There are women – women! Oh, they are all of a stamp – coin! Coin for any hand! It's a fiction, an imposture – they cannot love. They are the shadows of men. Compared with men, they have as much heart in them as the shadow beside the body. Laetitia!'

'Sir Willoughby.'

'You refuse my offer?'

'I must.'

'You refuse to take me for your husband?'

'I cannot be your wife.'

'You have changed?… you have set your heart?… you could marry?… there is a man?… you could marry one! I will have an answer, I am sick of evasions. What was in the mind of Heaven when women were created, will be the riddle to the end of the world! Every good man in turn has made the inquiry. I have a right to know who robs me – We may try as we like to solve it. – Satan is painted laughing! – I say I have a right to know who robs me. Answer me.'

'I shall not marry.'

'That is not an answer.'

'I love no one.'

'You loved me. – You are silent? – but you confessed it. Then you confess it was a love that could die! Are you unable to perceive how that redounds to my discredit? You loved me, you have ceased to love me. In other words you charge me with incapacity to sustain a woman's love. You accuse me of inspiring a miserable passion that cannot last a lifetime! You let the world see that I am a man to be aimed at for a temporary mark! And simply because I happen to be in your neighbourhood at an age when a young woman is impressionable! You make a public example of me as a man for whom women may have a caprice, but that is all; he cannot enchain them; he fascinates passingly; they fall off. Is it just, for me to be taken up and cast down at your will? Reflect

on that scandal! Shadows? Why, a man's shadow is faithful to him at least. What are women? There is not a comparison in nature that does not tower above them! not one that does not hoot at them! I, throughout my life, guided by absolute deference to their weakness – paying them politeness, courtesy – whatever I touch I am happy in, except when I touch women! How is it? What is the mystery? Some monstrous explanation must exist. What can it be? I am favoured by fortune from my birth until I enter into relations with women. But will you be so good as to account for it in your

defence of them? Oh! were the relations dishonourable, it would be quite another matter. *Then* they… I could recount… I disdain to chronicle such victories. Quite another matter. But they are flies, and I am something more stable. They are flies. I look beyond the day; I owe a duty to my line. They are flies. I foresee it, I shall be crossed in my fate so long as I fail to shun them – flies! Not merely born for the day, I maintain that they are spiritually ephemeral – Well, my opinion of your sex is directly traceable to you. You may alter it, or fling another of us men out on the world with the old bitter experience. Consider this, that it is on your head if my ideal of women is wrecked. It rests with you to restore it. I love you. I discover that you are the one woman I have always loved. I come to you, I sue you, and suddenly – you have changed! "I have changed: I am not the same." What can it mean? "I cannot marry: I love no one." And you say you do not know what love is – avowing in the same breath that you did love me! Am I the empty dream? My

hand, heart, fortune, name, are yours, at your feet; you kick them hence. I am here – you reject me. But why, for what mortal reason am I here other than my faith in your love? You drew me to you, to repel me, and have a wretched revenge.'

'You know it is not that, Sir Willoughby.'

'Have you any possible suspicion that I am still entangled, not, as I assure you I am, perfectly free in fact and in honour?'

'It is not that.'

'Name it; for you see your power. Would you have me kneel to you, madam?'

'Oh, no; it would complete my grief.'

'You feel grief? Then you believe in my affection, and you hurl it away. I have no doubt that as a poetess you would say, love is eternal. And you have loved me. And you tell me you love me no more. You are not very logical, Laetitia Dale.'

'Poetesses rarely are: if I am one, which I little pretend to be for writing silly verses. I have passed out of that delusion, with the rest.'

'You shall not wrong those dear old days, Laetitia. I see them now; when I rode by your cottage and you were at your window, pen in hand, your hair straying over your forehead. Romantic, yes; not foolish. Why were you foolish in thinking of me? Some day I will commission an artist to paint me that portrait of you from my description. And I remember when we first whispered… I remember your trembling. You have forgotten – I remember. I remember our meeting in the park on the path to church. I remember the heavenly morning of my return from my travels, and the same Laetitia meeting me, stedfast and unchangeable. Could I ever forget? Those are ineradicable scenes; pictures of my youth, interwound with me. I may say, that as I recede from them, I dwell on them the more. Tell me, Laetitia, was there not a certain prophecy of your father's concerning us two? I fancy I heard of one. There was one.'

'He was an invalid. Elderly people nurse illusions.'

'Ask yourself, Laetitia, who is the obstacle to the fulfilment of his prediction? – truth, if ever a truth was foreseen on earth. You have not changed so far that you would feel *no* pleasure in gratifying him? I go to him to-morrow morning with the first light.'

'You will compel me to follow, and undeceive him.'

'Do so, and I denounce an unworthy affection you are ashamed to avow.'

'That would be idle, though it would be base.'

'Proof of love, then! For no one but you should it be done, and no one but you dare accuse me of a baseness.'

'Sir Willoughby, you will let my father die in peace.'

'He and I together will contrive to persuade you.'

'You tempt me to imagine that you want a wife at any cost.'

'You, Laetitia, you.'

'I am tired,' she said. 'It is late, I would rather not hear more. I am sorry if I have caused you pain. I suppose you to have spoken with candour. I defend neither my sex nor myself. I can only say I am a woman as good as dead: happy to be made happy in my way, but so little alive that I can not realize any other way. As for love, I am thankful to have broken a spell. You have a younger woman in your mind; I am an old one: I have no ambition and no warmth. My utmost prayer is to float on the stream – a purely physical desire of life: I have no strength to swim. Such a woman is not the wife for you, Sir Willoughby. Good night.'

'One final word. Weigh it. Express no conventional regrets. Resolutely you refuse?'

'Resolutely I do.'

'You refuse?'

'Yes.'

'I have sacrificed my pride for nothing! You refuse?'

'Yes.'

'Humbled myself! And this is the answer! You do refuse?'

'I do.'

'Good night, Laetitia Dale.'

He gave her passage.

'Good night, Sir Willoughby.'

‘I am in your power,’ he said, in a voice between supplication and menace that laid a claw on her, and she turned and replied:

‘You will not be betrayed.’

‘I can trust you…?’

‘I go home to-morrow before breakfast.’

‘Permit me to escort you upstairs.’

‘If you please: but I see no one here either to-night or to-morrow.’

‘It is for the privilege of seeing the last of you.’

They withdrew.

Young Crossjay listened to the drumming of his head. Somewhere in or over the cavity a drummer rattled tremendously.

Sir Willoughby’s laboratory door shut with a slam.

Crossjay tumbled himself off the ottoman. He stole up to the unclosed drawing-room door, and peeped. Never was a boy more thoroughly awakened. His object was to get out of the house and go through the night avoiding everything human, for he was big with information of a character that he knew to be of the nature of gunpowder, and he feared to explode. He crossed the hall. In the passage to the scullery he ran against Colonel De Craye.

‘So there you are,’ said the colonel, ‘I’ve been hunting you.’

Crossjay related that his bedroom door was locked and the key gone, and Sir Willoughby sitting up in the laboratory.

Colonel De Craye took the boy to his own room, where Crossjay lay on a sofa, comfortably covered over and snug in a swelling pillow; but he was restless; he wanted to speak, to bellow, to cry; and he bounced round to his left side, and bounced to his right, not knowing what to think, except that there was treason to his adored Miss Middleton.

‘Why, my lad, you’re not half a campaigner,’ the colonel called out to him; attributing his uneasiness to the material discomfort of the sofa: and Crossjay had to swallow the taunt, bitter though it was. A dim sentiment of impropriety in unburdening his overcharged mind on the subject of Miss Middleton to Colonel De Craye restrained him from defending himself; and so he heaved and tossed about till daybreak. At an early hour, while his hospitable friend, who looked very handsome in profile half breast and head above the sheets, continued to slumber, Crossjay was on his legs and away.

‘He says I’m not half a campaigner, and a couple of hours of bed are enough for me,’ the boy thought proudly, and snuffed the springing air of the young sun on the fields. A glance back at Patterne Hall dismayed him, for he knew not how to act, and he was immoderately combustible, too full of knowledge for self-containment; much too zealously excited on behalf of his dear Miss Middleton to keep silent for many hours of the day.

CHAPTER 41

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The Rev. Dr Middleton, Clara, and Sir Willoughby

WHEN Master Crossjay tumbled down the stairs Laetitia was in Clara’s room, speculating on the various mishaps which might have befallen that battered youngster; and Clara listened anxiously after Laetitia had run out, until she heard Sir Willoughby’s voice; which in some way satisfied her that the boy was not in the house.

She waited, expecting Miss Dale to return; then undressed, went to bed, tried to sleep. She was tired of strife. Strange thoughts for a young head shot through her: as, that it is possible for the sense of duty to counteract distaste; and that one may live a life apart from one’s admirations and dislikes: she owned the singular strength of Sir Willoughby in outweary-ing; she asked herself how much she had gained by struggling: – every effort seemed to expend her spirit’s force, and rendered her less able to get the clear vision of her prospects, as though it had sunk her deeper: the contrary of her intention to make each further step confirm her liberty. Looking back, she marvelled at the things she had done. Looking round, how ineffectual they appeared! She had still the great scene of positive rebellion to go through with her father.

The anticipation of that was the cause of her extreme discouragement. He had not spoken to her since he became aware of her attempted flight: but the scene was coming; and besides the wish not to inflict it on him, as well as to escape it herself, the girl's peculiar unhappiness lay in her knowledge that they were alienated and stood opposed, owing to one among the more perplexing masculine weaknesses, which she could not hint at, dared barely think of, and would not name in her meditations. Diverting to other subjects, she allowed herself to exclaim, 'Wine, wine!' in renewed wonder of what there could be in wine to entrap venerable men and obscure their judgements. She was too young to consider that her being very much in the wrong gave all the importance to the cordial glass in a venerable gentleman's appreciation of his dues. Why should he fly from a priceless wine to gratify the caprices of a fantastical child guilty of seeking to commit a breach of faith? He harped on those words. Her fault was grave. No doubt the wine coloured it to him, as a drop or two will do in any cup: still her fault was grave.

She was too young for such considerations. She was ready to expatiate on the gravity of her fault, so long as the humiliation assisted to her disentanglement: her snared nature in the toils would not permit her to reflect on it further. She had never accurately perceived it: for the reason perhaps that Willoughby had not been moving in his appeals: but, admitting the charge of waywardness, she had come to terms with conscience, upon the understanding that she was to perceive it and regret it and do penance for it by-and-by: – by renouncing marriage altogether? How light a penance!

In the morning, she went to Laetitia's room, knocked, and had no answer.

She was informed at the breakfast-table of Miss Dale's departure. The ladies Eleanor and Isabel feared it to be a case of urgency at the cottage. No one had seen Vernon, and Clara requested Colonel De Craye to walk over to the cottage for news of Crossjay. He accepted the commission, simply to obey and be in her service: assuring her, however, that there was no need to be disturbed about the boy. He would have told her more, had not Dr Middleton led her out.

Sir Willoughby marked a lapse often minutes by his watch. His excellent aunts had ventured a comment on his appearance that frightened him lest he himself should be the person to betray his astounding discomfiture. He regarded his conduct as an act of madness, and Laetitia's as no less that of a madwoman – happily mad! Very happily mad indeed! Her rejection of his ridiculously generous proposal seemed to show an intervening hand in his favour, that sent her distraught at the right moment. He entirely trusted her to be discreet; but she was a miserable creature, who had lost the one last chance offered her by Providence, and furnished him with a signal instance of the mediocrity of woman's love.

Time was flying. In a little while Mrs Mountstuart would arrive. He could not fence her without a design in his head; he was destitute of an armoury if he had no scheme: he racked the brain only to succeed in rousing phantasmal vapours. Her infernal 'Twice!' would cease now to apply to Laetitia; it would be an echo of Lady Busshe. Nay, were all in the secret, *Thrice* jilted! might become the universal roar. And this, he reflected bitterly, of a man whom nothing but duty to his line had arrested from being the most mischievous of his class with women! Such is our reward for uprightness!

At the expiration of fifteen minutes by his watch, he struck a knuckle on the library door. Dr Middleton held it open to him.

'You are disengaged, sir?'

'The sermon is upon the paragraph which is toned to awaken the clerk,' replied the Rev. Doctor.

Clara was weeping.

Sir Willoughby drew near her solicitously.

Dr Middleton's mane of silvery hair was in a state bearing witness to the vehemence of the sermon, and Willoughby said: 'I hope, sir, you have not made too much of a trifle.'

'I believe, sir, that I have produced an effect, and that was the point in contemplation.'

'Clara! my dear Clara!' Willoughby touched her.

'She sincerely repents her conduct, I may inform you,' said Dr Middleton.

'My love!' Willoughby whispered. 'We have had a misunderstanding. I am at a loss to discover where I have been guilty, but I take the blame, all the blame. I implore you not to weep. Do me the favour to look at me. I would not have had you subjected to any interrogation whatever.'

'You are not to blame,' Clara said on a sob.

'Undoubtedly Willoughby is not to blame. It was not he who was bound on a runaway errand in flagrant breach of duty and decorum, nor he who inflicted a catarrh on a brother of my craft and cloth,' said her father.

'The clerk, sir, has pronounced Amen,' observed Willoughby.

‘And no man is happier to hear an ejaculation that he has laboured for with so much sweat of his brow than the parson, I can assure you,’ Dr Middleton mildly groaned. ‘I have notions of the trouble of Abraham. A sermon of that description is an immolation of the parent, however it may go with the child.’

Willoughby soothed his Clara.

‘I wish I had been here to share it. I might have saved you some tears. I may have been hasty in our little dissensions. I will acknowledge that I have been. My temper is often irascible.’

‘And so is mine!’ exclaimed Dr Middleton. ‘And yet I am not aware that I made the worse husband for it. Nor do I rightly comprehend how a probably justly excitable temper can stand for a plea in mitigation of an attempt at an outrageous breach of faith.’

‘The sermon is over, sir.’

‘Reverberations!’ the Rev. Doctor waved his arm placably. ‘Take it for thunder heard remote.’

‘Your hand, my love,’ Willoughby murmured.

The hand was not put forth.

Dr Middleton remarked the fact. He walked to the window, and perceiving the pair in the same position when he faced about, he delivered a cough of admonition.

‘It is cruel!’ said Clara.

‘That the owner of your hand should petition you for it?’ inquired her father.

She sought refuge in a fit of tears.

Willoughby bent above her, mute.

‘Is a scene that is hardly conceivable as a parent’s obligation once in a lustrum, to be repeated within the half hour?’ shouted her father.

She drew up her shoulders and shook; let them fall and dropped her head.

‘My dearest! your hand!’ fluted Willoughby.

The hand surrendered; it was much like the icicle of a sudden thaw.

Willoughby squeezed it to his ribs.

Dr Middleton marched up and down the room with his arms locked behind him. The silence between the young people seemed to denounce his presence.

He said, cordially: ‘Old Hiems has but to withdraw for buds to burst. “Jam ver egelidos refert tepores.” The equinoctial fury departs.[30] I will leave you for a term.’

Clara and Willoughby simultaneously raised their faces with opposing expressions.

‘My girl!’ Her father stood by her, laying gentle hand on her.

‘Yes, papa, I will come out to you,’ she replied to his apology for the rather heavy weight of his vocabulary, and smiled.

‘No, sir, I beg you will remain,’ said Willoughby.

‘I keep you frost-bound.’

Clara did not deny it.

Willoughby emphatically did.

Then which of them was the more lover-like? Dr Middleton would for the moment have supposed his daughter.

Clara said: ‘Shall you be on the lawn, papa?’

Willoughby interposed. ‘Stay, sir; give us your blessing.’

‘That you have.’ Dr Middleton hastily motioned the paternal ceremony in outline.

‘A few minutes, papa,’ said Clara.

‘Will she name the day?’ came eagerly from Willoughby.

‘I cannot!’ Clara cried in extremity.

‘The day is important on its arrival,’ said her father; ‘but apprehend the decision to be of the chief importance at present. First prime your piece of artillery, my friend.’

‘The decision is taken, sir.’

‘Then I will be out of the way of the firing. Hit what day you please.’

Clara checked herself on an impetuous exclamation. It was done that her father might not be detained.

Her astute self-compression sharpened Willoughby as much as it mortified and terrified him. He understood how he would stand in an instant were Dr Middleton absent. Her father was the tribunal she dreaded, and affairs must be settled and made irrevocable while he was with them. To sting the blood of

the girl, he called her his darling, and half enwound her, shadowing forth a salute.

She strung her body to submit, seeing her father take it as a signal for his immediate retirement.

Willoughby was upon him before he reached the door.

'Hear us out, sir. Do not go. Stay, at my entreaty. I fear we have not come to a perfect reconcilement.'

'If that is your opinion,' said Clara, 'it is good reason for not distressing my father.'

'Dr Middleton, I love your daughter. I wooed her and won her; I had your consent to our union, and I was the happiest of mankind. In some way, since her coming to my house, I know not how – she will not tell me, or cannot – I offended. One may be innocent and offend. I have never pretended to impeccability, which is an admission that I may very naturally offend. My appeal to her is for an explanation or for pardon. I obtain neither. Had our positions been reversed, oh, not for any real offence – not for the worst that can be imagined – I think not – I hope not – could I have been tempted to propose the dissolution of our engagement. To love is to love, with me; an engagement a solemn bond. With all my errors I have that merit of utter fidelity – to the world laughable! I confess to a multitude of errors; I have that single merit, and am not the more estimable in your daughter's eyes on account of it, I

fear. In plain words, I am, I do not doubt, one of the fools among men; of the description of human dog commonly known as faithful – whose destiny is that of a tribe. A man who cries out when he is hurt is absurd, and I am not asking for sympathy. Call me luckless. But I abhor a breach of faith. A broken pledge is hateful to me. I should regard it myself as a form of suicide. There are principles which civilized men must contend for. Our social fabric is based on them. As my word stands for me, I hold others to theirs. If that is not done, the world is more or less a carnival of counterfeits. In this instance – Ah! Clara, my love! and you have principles: you have inherited, you have been indoctrinated with them: have I, then, in my ignorance, offended past penitence, that you, of all women?… And without being able to name my sin! – Not only for what I lose by it, but in the abstract, judicially – apart from the sentiment of personal interest, grief, pain, and the possibility of my having to endure that which no temptation would induce me to commit: – judicially; – I fear, sir, I am a poor forensic orator…'

'The situation, sir, does not demand a Cicero: proceed,' said Dr Middleton, balked in his approving nods at the right true things delivered.

'Judicially, I am bold to say, though it may appear a presumption in one suffering acutely, I abhor a breach of faith.'

Dr Middleton brought his nod down low upon the phrase he had anticipated. 'And I,' said he, 'personally, and presently, abhor a breach of faith. Judicially? Judicially to examine, judicially to condemn: but does the judicial mind detest? I think, sir, we are not on the bench when we say that we abhor: we have unseated ourselves. Yet our abhorrence of bad conduct is very certain. You would signify, impersonally: which suffices for this exposition of your feelings.'

He peered at the gentleman under his brows, and resumed: 'She has had it, Willoughby; she has had it in plain Saxon and in uncompromising Olympian. There is, I conceive, no necessity to revert to it.'

'Pardon me, sir, but I am still unforgiven.'

'You must babble out the rest between you. I am about as much at home as a turkey with a pair of pigeons.'

'Leave us, father,' said Clara.

'First join our hands, and let me give you that title, sir.'

'Reach the good man your hand, my girl; forthright, from the shoulder, like a brave boxer. Humour a lover. He asks for his own.'

'It is more than I can do, father.'

'How, it is more than you can do? You are engaged to him, a plighted woman.'

'I do not wish to marry.'

'The apology is inadequate.'

'I am unworthy…'

'Chatter! chatter!'

'I beg him to release me.'

'Lunacy!'

'I have no love to give him.'

'Have you gone back to your cradle, Clara Middleton?'

'Oh, leave us, dear father!'

‘My offence, Clara, my offence! What is it? Will you only name it?’

‘Father, will you leave us? We can better speak together…’

‘We have spoken, Clara, how often!’ Willoughby resumed, ‘with what result? – that you loved me, that you have ceased to love me: that your heart was mine, that you have withdrawn it, plucked it from me: that you request me to consent to a sacrifice involving my reputation, my life. And what have I done? I am the same, unchangeable. I loved and love you: my heart was yours, and is, and will be yours forever. You are my affianced – that is, my wife. What have I done?’

‘It is indeed useless,’ Clara sighed.

‘Not useless, my girl, that you should inform this gentleman, your affianced husband, of the ground of the objection you conceived against him.’

‘I cannot say.’

‘Do you know?’

‘If I could name it, I could hope to overcome it.’

Dr Middleton addressed Sir Willoughby.

‘I verily believe we are directing the girl to dissect a caprice. Such things are seen large by these young people, but as they have neither organs, nor arteries, nor brains, nor membranes, dissection and inspection will be alike profitlessly practised. Your inquiry is natural for a lover, whose passion to enter into relations with the sex is ordinarily in proportion to his ignorance of the stuff composing them. At a particular age they traffic in whims: which are, I presume, the spiritual of hysterics; and are indubitably preferable, so long as they are not pushed too far. Examples are not wanting to prove that a flighty initiative on the part of the male is a handsome corrective. In that case, we should probably have had the roof off the house, and the girl now at your feet. Ha!’

‘Despise me, father. I am punished for ever thinking myself the superior of any woman,’ said Clara.

‘Your hand out to him, my dear, since he is for a formal reconciliation; and I can’t wonder.’

‘Father! I have said I do not… I have said I cannot…’

‘By the most merciful! what? what? the name for it, words for it!’

‘Do not frown on me, father. I wish him happiness. I cannot marry him. I do not love him.’

‘You will remember that you informed me aforetime that you did love him.’

‘I was ignorant… I did not know myself. I wish him to be happy.’

‘You deny him the happiness you wish him!’

‘It would not be for his happiness were I to wed him.’

‘Oh!’ burst from Willoughby.

‘You hear him. He rejects your prediction, Clara Middleton.’

She caught her clasped hands up to her throat. ‘Wretched, wretched, both!’

‘And you have not a word against him, miserable girl.’

‘Miserable! I am.’

‘It is the cry of an animal!’

‘Yes, father.’

‘You feel like one? Your behaviour is of that shape. You have not a word?’

‘Against myself: not against him.’

‘And I, when you speak so generously, am to yield you? give you up?’ cried Willoughby. ‘Ah! my love, my Clara, impose what you will on me; not that. It is too much for man. It is, I swear it, beyond my strength.’

‘Pursue, continue the strain; ’tis in the right key,’ said Dr Middleton, departing.

Willoughby wheeled and waylaid him with a bound.

‘Plead for me, sir; you are all-powerful. Let her be mine, she shall be happy, or I will perish for it. I will call it on my head. – Impossible! I cannot lose her. Lose you, my love? It would be to strip myself of every blessing of body and soul. It would be to deny myself possession of grace, beauty, wit, all the incomparable charms of loveliness of mind and person in woman, and plant myself in a desert. You are my mate, the sum of everything I call mine. Clara, I should be less than man to submit to such a loss. Consent to it? But I love you! I worship you! How can I consent to lose you…?’

He saw the eyes of the desperately wily young woman slink sideways. Dr Middleton was pacing at ever shorter lengths closer by the door.

‘You hate me?’ Willoughby sunk his voice.

‘If it should turn to hate!’ she murmured.

‘Hatred of your husband?’

‘I could not promise,’ she murmured, more softly in her wiliness.

‘Hatred?’ he cried aloud, and Dr Middleton stopped in his walk and flung up his head: ‘Hatred of your husband? of the man you have vowed to love and honour? Oh, no! Once mine, it is not to be feared. I trust to my knowledge of your nature; I trust in your blood, I trust in your education. Had I nothing else to inspire confidence, I could trust in your eyes. And, Clara, take the confession: I would rather be hated than lose you. For if I lose you, you are in another world, out of this one holding me in its death-like cold; but if you hate me we are together, we are still together. Any alliance, any, in preference to separation!’

Clara listened with critical ear. His language and tone were new; and comprehending that they were in part addressed to her father, whose phrase: ‘A breach of faith’: he had so cunningly used, disdain of the actor prompted the extreme blunder of her saying – frigidly though she said it:

‘You have not talked to me in this way before.’

‘Finally,’ remarked her father, summing up the situation to settle it from that little speech, ‘he talks to you in this way now; and you are under my injunction to stretch your hand out to him for a symbol of union, or to state your objection to that course. He, by your admission, is at the terminus, and there, failing the why not, must you join him.’

Her head whirled. She had been severely flagellated and weakened previous to Willoughby’s entrance. Language to express her peculiar repulsion eluded her. She formed the words, and perceived that they would not stand to bear a breath from her father. She perceived too that Willoughby was as ready with his agony of supplication as she with hers. If she had tears for a resource, he had gestures quite as eloquent; and a cry of her loathing of the union would fetch a countervailing torrent of the man’s love. – What could she say? he is an Egoist? The epithet has no meaning in such a scene. *Invent!* shrieked the hundred-voiced instinct of dislike within her, and alone with her father, alone with Willoughby, she could have invented some equivalent, to do her heart justice for the injury it sustained in her being unable to name the true and immense objection: but the pair in presence paralyzed her. She dramatized them each springing forward by turns, with crushing

rejoinders. The activity of her mind revelled in giving them a tongue, but would not do it for herself. Then ensued the inevitable consequence of an incapacity to speak at the heart’s urgent dictate: heart and mind became divided. One throbbed hotly, the other hung aloof; and mentally, while the sick inarticulate heart kept clamouring, she answered it with all that she imagined for those two men to say. And she dropped poison on it to still its reproaches: bidding herself remember her fatal postponements in order to preserve the seeming of consistency before her father; calling it hypocrite; asking herself, what was she! who loved her! And thus beating down her heart, she completed the mischief with a piercing view of the foundation of her father’s advocacy of Willoughby, and more lamentably asked herself what her value was, if she stood bereft of respect for her father.

Reason, on the other hand, was animated by her better nature to plead his case against her: she clung to her respect for him, and felt herself drowning with it: and she echoed Willoughby consciously, doubling her horror with the consciousness, in crying out on a world where the most sacred feelings are subject to such lapses. It doubled her horror, that she should echo the man: but it proved that she was no better than he: only some years younger. Those years would soon be outlived: after which, he and she would be of a pattern. She was unloved: she did no harm to any one by keeping her word to this man; she had pledged it, and it would be a breach of faith not to keep it. No one loved her. Behold the quality of her father’s love! To give him happiness was now the principal aim for her, her own happiness being decently buried; and here he was happy: why should she be the cause of his going and losing the poor pleasure he so much enjoyed?

The idea of her devotedness flattered her feebleness. She betrayed signs of hesitation; and in hesitating, she looked away from a look at Willoughby, thinking (so much against her nature was it to resign herself to him) that it would not have been so difficult with an ill-favoured man. With one horribly ugly, it would have been a horrible exultation to cast off her youth and take the fiendish leap.

Unfortunately for Sir Willoughby, he had his reasons for pressing impatience; and seeing her deliberate, seeing her hasty look at his fine figure, his opinion of himself combined with his recollection of a particular maxim of the Great Book to assure him that her resistance was over: chiefly owing, as he supposed, to his physical perfections.

Frequently indeed, in the contest between gentlemen and ladies, have the maxims of the Book stimulated the assailant to victory. They are rosy with blood of victims. To hear them is to hear a horn that blows the

mort: has blown it a thousand times. It is good to remember how often they have succeeded, when, for the benefit of some future Lady Vauban,[31] who may bestir her wits to gather maxims for the inspiriting of the Defence, the circumstance of a failure has to be recorded.

Willoughby could not wait for the melting of the snows. He saw full surely the dissolving process; and sincerely admiring and coveting her as he did, rashly this ill-fated gentleman attempted to precipitate it, and so doing arrested.

Whence might we draw a note upon yonder maxim, in words akin to these: Make certain ere a breath come from thee that thou be not a frost.

'Mine! She is mine!' he cried: 'mine once more! mine utterly! mine eternally!' and he followed up his devouring exclamations in person as she, less decidedly, retreated. She retreated as young ladies should ever do, two or three steps, and he would not notice that she had become an angry Dian, all arrows: her maidenliness in surrendering pleased him. Grasping one fair hand, he just allowed her to edge on the outer circle of his embrace, crying: 'Not a syllable of what I have gone through! You shall not have to explain it, my Clara. I will study you more diligently, to be guided by you, my darling. If I offend again, my wife will not find it hard to speak what my bride withheld – I do not ask why: perhaps not able to weigh the effect of her reticence: not at that time, when she was younger and less experienced, estimating the sacredness of a plighted engagement. It is past, we are one, my dear sir and father. You may leave us now.'

'I profoundly rejoice to hear that I may,' said Dr Middleton.

Clara writhed her captured hand.

'No, papa, stay. It is an error, an error. You must not leave me. Do not think me utterly, eternally, belonging to any one but you. No one shall say I am his but you.'

'Are you quicksands, Clara Middleton, that nothing can be built on you? Whither is a flighty head and a shifty will carrying the girl?'

'Clara and I, sir,' said Willoughby.

'And so you shall,' said the Doctor, turning about.

'Not yet, papa.' Clara sprang to him.

'Why, you, you, you, it was you who craved to be alone with Willoughby!' her father shouted; 'and here we are rounded to our starting-point, with the solitary difference that now you do not want to be alone with Willoughby. First I am bidden go; next I am pulled back; and judging by collar and coat-tail, I suspect you to be a young woman to wear an angel's temper threadbare before you determine upon which one of the tides driving him to and fro you intend to launch on yourself. Where is your mind?'

Clara smoothed her forehead.

'I wish to please you, papa.'

'I request you to please the gentleman who is your appointed husband.'

'I am anxious to perform my duty.'

'That should be a satisfactory basis for you, Willoughby; – as girls go!'

'Let me, sir, simply entreat to have her hand in mine before you.'

'Why not, Clara?'

'Why an empty ceremony, papa?'

'The implication is, that she is prepared for the important one, friend Willoughby.'

'Her hand, sir; the reassurance of her hand in mine under your eyes: – after all that I have suffered, I claim it, I think I claim it reasonably, to restore me to confidence.'

'Quite reasonably; which is not to say, necessarily; but, I will add, justifiably; and it may be, sagaciously, when dealing with the volatile.'

'And here,' said Willoughby, 'is my hand.'

Clara recoiled.

He stepped on. Her father frowned. She lifted both her hands from the shrinking elbows, darted a look of repulsion at her pursuer, and ran to her father, crying: 'Call it my mood! I am volatile, capricious, flighty, very foolish. But you see that I attach a real meaning to it, and feel it to be binding: I cannot think it an empty ceremony, if it is before you. Yes, only be a little considerate to your moody girl. She will be in a fitter state in a few hours. Spare me this moment; I must collect myself. I thought I was free; I thought he would not press me. If I give my hand hurriedly now, I shall, I know, immediately repent it. There is the picture of me! But, papa, I mean to try to be above that, and if I go and walk by myself, I shall grow calm to perceive where my duty lies…'

‘In which direction shall you walk?’ said Willoughby.

‘Wisdom is not upon a particular road,’ said Dr Middleton.

‘I have a dread, sir, of that one which leads to the railway-station.’

‘With some justice!’ Dr Middleton sighed over his daughter.

Clara coloured to deep crimson: but she was beyond anger, and was rather gratified by an offence coming from Willoughby.

‘I will promise not to leave his grounds, papa.’

‘My child, you have threatened to be a breaker of promises.’

‘Oh!’ she wailed. ‘But I will make it a vow to you.’

‘Why not make it a vow to me this moment, for this gentleman’s contentment, that he shall be your husband within a given period?’

‘I will come to you voluntarily. I burn to be alone.’

‘I shall lose her,’ exclaimed Willoughby, in heartfelt earnest.

‘How so?’ said Dr Middleton. ‘I have her, sir, if you will favour me by continuing in abeyance. – You will come within an hour voluntarily, Clara; and you will either at once yield your hand to him or you will furnish reasons, and they must be good ones, for withholding it.’

‘Yes, papa.’

‘You will?’

‘I will.’

‘Mind, I say *reasons*.’

‘Reasons, papa. If I have none…’

‘If you have none that are to my satisfaction, you implicitly and instantly, and cordially obey my command.’

‘I will obey.’

‘What more would you require?’ Dr Middleton bowed to Sir Willoughby in triumph.

‘Will she…’

‘Sir! sir!’

‘She is your daughter, sir. I am satisfied.’

‘She has perchance wrestled with her engagement, as the aboriginals of a land newly discovered by a crew of adventurous colonists do battle with the garments imposed on them by our considerate civilization; – ultimately to rejoice with excessive dignity in the wearing of a battered cocked-hat and trowsers not extending to the shanks: but she did not break her engagement, sir; and we will anticipate that, moderating a young woman’s native wildness, she may, after the manner of my comparison, take a similar pride in her fortune in good season.’

Willoughby had not leisure to sound the depth of Dr Middleton’s compliment. He had seen Clara gliding out of the room during the delivery; and his fear returned on him that, not being won, she was lost.

‘She has gone.’ Her father noticed her absence. ‘She does not waste time in her mission to procure that astonishing product of a shallow soil, her reasons; if such be the object of her search. But no: it signifies that she deems herself to have need of composure – nothing more. No one likes to be turned about; we like to turn ourselves about; and in the question of an act to be committed, we stipulate that it shall be our act – girls and others. After the lapse of an hour, it will appear to her as her act. Happily, Willoughby, we do not dine away from Patterne to-night.’

‘No, sir.’

‘It may be attributable to a sense of deserving, but I could plead guilty to a weakness for old Port to-day.’

‘There shall be an extra bottle, sir.’

‘All going favourably with you, as I have no cause to doubt,’ said Dr Middleton, with the motion of wafting his host out of the library.

CHAPTER 42

Shows the Divining Arts of a Perceptive Mind

STARTING from the Hall a few minutes before Dr Middleton and Sir Willoughby had entered the drawing-room overnight, Vernon parted company with Colonel De Craye at the park-gates, and betook himself to the cottage of the Dales, where nothing had been heard of his wanderer; and he received the same disappointing reply from Dr Corney, out of the bedroom window of the genial physician, whose astonishment at his covering so long a stretch of road at night for news of a boy like Crossjay – gifted with the lives of a cat – became violent and rapped Punch-like blows on the window-sill at Vernon's refusal to take shelter and rest. Vernon's excuse was that he had 'no one but that fellow to care for', and he strode off, naming a farm five miles distant. Dr Corney howled an invitation to early breakfast to him, in the event of his passing on his way back, and retired to bed to think of him. The result of a variety of conjectures caused him to set Vernon down as Miss Middleton's knight, and he felt a strong compassion for his poor friend. 'Though,' thought he, 'a hopeless attachment is as pretty an accompaniment to the tune of life as a gentleman might wish to have, for it's one of those big doses of discord which make all the minor ones fit in like an agreeable harmony, and so he shuffles along as pleasantly as the fortune-favoured, when they come to compute!'

Sir Willoughby was the fortune-favoured in the little doctor's mind; that high-stepping gentleman having wealth, and public consideration, and the most ravishing young lady in the world for a bride. Still, though he reckoned all these advantages enjoyed by Sir Willoughby at their full value, he could imagine the ultimate balance of good fortune to be in favour of Vernon. But to do so, he had to reduce the whole calculation to the extreme abstract, and feed his lean friend, as it were, on dew and roots; and the happy effect for Vernon lay in a distant future, on the borders of old age, where he was to be blessed with his lady's regretful preference, and rejoice in the fruits of good constitutional habits. The reviewing mind was Irish. Sir Willoughby was a character of man profoundly opposed to Dr Corney's nature; the latter's instincts bristled with antagonism – not to his race, for Vernon was of the same race, partly of the same blood, and Corney loved him: the type of person was the annoyance. And the circumstance of its prevailing successfulness in the country where he was placed, while it held him silent as if under a law, heaped stores of insurgency in the Celtic bosom. Corney contemplating Sir Willoughby, and a trotting kern governed by Strongbow, have a point of likeness between them; with the point of difference that Corney was enlightened to know of a friend better adapted for eminent station, and especially better

adapted to please a lovely lady – could these high-bred Englishwomen but be taught to conceive another idea of manliness than the formal carved-in-wood idol of their national worship!

Dr Corney breakfasted very early, without seeing Vernon. He was off to a patient while the first lark of the morning carolled above, and the business of the day, not yet fallen upon men in the shape of cloud, was happily intermixed with nature's hues and pipings. Turning off the high-road up a green lane, an hour later, he beheld a youngster prying into a hedge head and arms, by the peculiar strenuous twist of whose hinder parts, indicative of a frame plunged on the pursuit in hand, he clearly distinguished young Crossjay. Out came eggs. The doctor pulled up.

'What bird?' he bellowed.

'Yellowhammer,' Crossjay yelled back.

'Now, sir, you'll drop a couple of those eggs in the nest.'

'Don't order me,' Crossjay was retorting. 'Oh, it's you, Doctor Corney. Good-morning. I said that, because I always do drop a couple back. I promised Mr Whitford I would, and Miss Middleton too.'

'Had breakfast?'

'Not yet.'

'Not hungry?'

'I should be if I thought about it.'

'Jump up.'

'I think I'd rather not, Doctor Corney.'

'And you'll just do what Doctor Corney tells you; and set your mind on rashers of curly fat bacon and sweetly smoking coffee, toast, hot cakes, marmalade, and damson-jam. Wide go the fellow's nostrils, and there's water at the dimples of his mouth! Up, my man.'

Crossjay jumped up beside the doctor, who remarked, as he touched his horse: 'I don't want a man this morning, though I'll enlist you in my service if I do. You're fond of Miss Middleton?'

Instead of answering, Crossjay heaved the sigh of love that bears a burden.

‘And so am I,’ pursued the doctor: ‘You’ll have to put up with a rival. It’s worse than fond: I’m in love with her. How do you like that?’

‘I don’t mind how many *love* her,’ said Crossjay.

‘You’re worthy of a gratuitous breakfast in the front parlour of the best hotel of the place they call Arcadia. And how about your bed last night?’

‘Pretty middling.’

‘Hard, was it, where the bones haven’t cushion?’

‘I don’t care for bed. A couple of hours, and that’s enough for me.’

‘But you’re fond of Miss Middleton anyhow, and that’s a virtue.’

To his great surprise, Dr Corney beheld two big round tears force their way out of this tough youngster’s eyes, and all the while the boy’s face was proud.

Crossjay said, when he could trust himself to disjoin his lips: ‘I want to see Mr Whitford.’

‘Have you got news for him?’

‘I’ve something to ask him. It’s about what I ought to do.’

‘Then, my boy, you have the right name addressed in the wrong direction: for I found you turning your shoulders on Mr Whitford. And he has been out of his bed hunting you all the unholy night you’ve made it for him. That’s melancholy. What do you say to asking my advice?’

Crossjay sighed. ‘I can’t speak to anybody but Mr Whitford.’

‘And you’re hot to speak to him?’

‘I want to.’

‘And I found you running away from him. You’re a curiosity, Mr Crossjay Patterne.’

‘Ah! so’d anybody be who knew as much as I do,’ said Crossjay, with a sober sadness that caused the doctor to treat him seriously.

‘The fact is,’ he said, ‘Mr Whitford is beating the country for you. My best plan will be to drive you to the Hall.’

‘I’d rather not go to the Hall,’ Crossjay spoke resolutely.

‘You won’t see Miss Middleton anywhere but at the Hall.’

‘I don’t want to see Miss Middleton, if I can’t be a bit of use to her.’

‘No danger threatening the lady, is there?’

Crossjay treated the question as if it had not been put.

‘Now, tell me,’ said Dr Corney, ‘would there be a chance for me, supposing Miss Middleton were disengaged?’

The answer was easy. ‘I’m sure she wouldn’t.’

‘And why, sir, are you so cock sure?’

There was no saying; but the doctor pressed for it, and at last Crossjay gave his opinion that she would take Mr Whitford.

The doctor asked why; and Crossjay said it was because Mr Whitford was the best man in the world. To which, with a lusty ‘Amen to that,’ Dr Corney remarked: ‘I should have fancied Colonel De Craye would have had the first chance: he’s more of a lady’s man.’

Crossjay surprised him again by petulantly saying: ‘Don’t.’

The boy added: ‘I don’t want to talk, except about birds and things. What a jolly morning it is! I saw the sun rise. No rain to-day. You’re right about hungry, Doctor Corney!’

The kindly little man swung his whip. Crossjay informed him of his disgrace at the Hall, and of every incident connected with it, from the tramp to the baronet, save Miss Middleton’s adventure and the night scene in the drawing-room. A strong smell of something left out struck Dr Corney, and he said: ‘You’ll not let Miss Middleton know of my affection. After all, it’s only a little bit of love. But, as Patrick said to Kathleen, when she owned to such a little bit, “that’s the best bit of all!” and he was as right as I am about hungry.’

Crossjay scorned to talk of loving, he declared. ‘I never tell Miss Middleton what I feel. Why, there’s Miss Dale’s cottage!’

‘It’s nearer to your empty inside than my mansion,’ said the doctor, ‘and we’ll stop just to inquire whether a bed’s to be had for you there to-night, and if not, I’ll have you with me, and bottle you, and exhibit you, for you’re a rare specimen. Breakfast you may count on from Mr Dale. I spy a gentleman.’

‘It’s Colonel De Craye.’

‘Come after news of you.’

‘I wonder!’

‘Miss Middleton sends him; of course she does.’

Crossjay turned his full face to the doctor. ‘I haven’t seen her for such a long time! But he saw me last night, and he might have told her that, if she’s anxious. – Good-morning, colonel. I’ve had a good walk, and a capital drive, and I’m as hungry as the boat’s crew of Captain Bligh.’

He jumped down.

The colonel and the doctor saluted, smiling.

‘I’ve rung the bell,’ said De Craye.

A maid came to the gate, and upon her steps appeared Miss Dale, who flung herself at Crossjay, mingling kisses and reproaches. She scarcely raised her face to the colonel more than to reply to his greeting, and excuse the hungry boy for hurrying indoors to breakfast.

‘I’ll wait,’ said De Craye. He had seen that she was paler than usual. So had Dr Corney; and the doctor called to her concerning her father’s health. She reported that he had not yet risen, and took Crossjay to herself.

‘That’s well,’ said the doctor, ‘if the invalid sleeps long. The lady is not looking so well, though. But ladies vary; they show the mind on the countenance, for want of the punching we meet with to conceal it; they’re like military flags for a funeral or a gala; one day furled, and next day streaming. Men are ships’ figure-heads, about the same for a storm or a calm, and not too handsome, thanks to the ocean. It’s an age since we encountered last, colonel: on board the Dublin boat, I recollect, and a night it was.’

‘I recollect that you set me on my legs, doctor.’

‘Ah! and you’ll please to notify that Corney’s no quack at sea, by favour of the monks of the Chartreuse, whose elixir has power to still the waves. And we hear that miracles are done with!’

‘Roll a physician and a monk together, doctor!’

‘True: it’ll be a miracle if they combine. Though the cure of the soul is often the entire and total cure of the body: and it’s maliciously said that the body given over to our treatment is a signal to set the soul flying. By the way, colonel, that boy has a trifle on his mind.’

‘I suppose he has been worrying a farmer or a gamekeeper.’

‘Try him. You’ll find him tight. He’s got Miss Middleton on the brain. There’s a bit of a secret; and he’s not so cheerful about it.’

‘We’ll see,’ said the colonel.

Dr Corney nodded. ‘I have to visit my patient here presently. I’m too early for him: so I’ll make a call or two on the lame birds that are up,’ he remarked, and drove away.

De Craye strolled through the garden. He was a gentleman of those actively perceptive wits which, if ever they reflect, do so by hops and jumps: upon some dancing mirror within, we may fancy. He penetrated a plot in a flash; and in a flash he formed one; but in both cases, it was after long hovering and not over-eager deliberation, by the patient exercise of his quick perceptives. The fact that Crossjay was considered to have Miss Middleton on the brain, threw a series of images of everything relating to Crossjay for the last forty hours into relief before him: and as he did not in the slightest degree speculate on any one of them, but merely shifted and surveyed them, the falcon that he was in spirit as well as in his handsome face leisurely allowed his instinct to direct him where to strike. A reflective disposition has this danger in action, that it commonly precipitates conjecture for the purpose of working upon probabilities with the methods and in the tracks to

which it is accustomed: and to conjecture rashly is to play into the puzzles of the maze. He who can watch circling above it awhile, quietly viewing, and collecting in his eye, gathers matter that makes the secret thing discourse to the brain by weight and balance; he will get either the right clue or none; more frequently none; but he will escape the entanglement of his own cleverness, he will always be nearer to the enigma than the guesser or the calculator, and he will retain a breadth of vision forfeited by them. He must, however, to have his chance of success, be acutely besides calmly perceptive, a reader of features, audacious at the proper moment.

De Craye wished to look at Miss Dale. She had returned home very suddenly, not, as it appeared, owing to her father’s illness; and he remembered a redness of her eyelids when he passed her on the corridor one night. She sent Crossjay out to him as soon as the boy was well filled. He sent Crossjay back with a request. She did not yield to it immediately. She stepped to the front door reluctantly, and seemed disconcerted. De

Craye begged for a message to Miss Middleton. There was none to give. He persisted. But there was really none at present, she said.

'You won't entrust me with the smallest word?' said he, and set her visibly thinking whether she could dispatch a word. She could not; she had no heart for messages.

'I shall see her in a day or two, Colonel De Craye.'

'She will miss you severely.'

'We shall soon meet.'

'And poor Willoughby!'

Laetitia coloured and stood silent.

A butterfly of some rarity allured Crossjay.

'I fear he has been doing mischief,' she said. 'I cannot get him to look at me.'

'His appetite is good?'

'Very good indeed.'

De Craye nodded. A boy with a noble appetite is never a hopeless lock.

The colonel and Crossjay lounged over the garden.

'And now,' said the colonel, 'we'll see if we can't arrange a meeting between you and Miss Middleton. You're a lucky fellow, for she's always thinking of you.'

'I know I'm always thinking of her,' said Crossjay.

'If ever you're in a scrape, she's the person you must go to.'

'Yes, if I know where she is!'

'Why, generally she'll be at the Hall.'

There was no reply: Crossjay's dreadful secret jumped to his throat. He certainly was a weaker lock for being full of breakfast.

'I want to see Mr Whitford so much,' he said.

'Something to tell him?'

'I don't know what to do: I don't understand it!' The secret wriggled to his mouth. He swallowed it down. 'Yes, I want to talk to Mr Whitford.'

'He's another of Miss Middleton's friends.'

'I know he is. He's true steel.'

'We're all her friends, Crossjay. I flatter myself I'm a Toledo when I'm wanted. How long had you been in the house last night before you ran into me?'

'I don't know, sir; I fell asleep for some time, and then I woke…'

'Where did you find yourself?'

'I was in the drawing-room.'

'Come, Crossjay, you're not a fellow to be scared by ghosts? You looked it when you made a dash at my midriff.'

'I don't believe there are such things. Do you, colonel? You can't!'

'There's no saying. We'll hope not; for it wouldn't be fair fighting. A man with a ghost to back him'd beat any ten. We couldn't box him or play cards, or stand a chance with him as a rival in love. Did you, now, catch a sight of a ghost?'

'They weren't ghosts!' Crossjay said what he was sure of, and his voice pronounced his conviction.

'I doubt whether Miss Middleton is particularly happy,' remarked the colonel. 'Why? Why, you upset her, you know, now and then.'

The boy swelled. 'I'd do… I'd go… I wouldn't have her unhappy… It's that! that's it! And I don't know what I ought to do. I wish I could see Mr Whitford.'

'You get into such headlong scrapes, my lad.'

'I wasn't in any scrape yesterday.'

'So you made yourself up a comfortable bed in the drawing-room? Luckily Sir Willoughby didn't see you.'

'He didn't, though!'

'A close shave, was it?'

'I was under a covering of something silk.'

'He woke you?'

‘I suppose he did. I heard him.’

‘Talking?’

‘He was talking.’

‘What! talking to himself?’

‘No.’

The secret threatened Crossjay to be out or suffocate him.

De Craye gave him a respite.

‘You like Sir Willoughby, don’t you?’

Crossjay produced a still-born affirmative.

‘He’s kind to you,’ said the colonel; ‘he’ll set you up and look after your interests.’

‘Yes, I like him,’ said Crossjay, with his customary rapidity in touching the subject; ‘I like him; he’s kind and all that, and tips and plays with you, and all that; but I never can make out why he wouldn’t see my father when my father came here to see him ten miles, and had to walk back ten miles in the rain, to go by rail a long way, down home, as far as Devonport, because Sir Willoughby wouldn’t see him, though he was at home, my father saw. We all thought it so odd: and my father wouldn’t let us talk much about it. My father’s a very brave man.’

‘Captain Patterne is as brave a man as ever lived,’ said De Craye.

‘I’m positive you’d like him, colonel.’

‘I know of his deeds, and I admire him, and that’s a good step to liking.’

He warmed the boy’s thoughts of his father.

‘Because, what they say at home is, a little bread and cheese, and a glass of ale, and a rest, to a poor man – lots of great houses will give you that, and we wouldn’t have asked for more than that. My sisters say they think Sir Willoughby must be selfish. He’s awfully proud; and perhaps it was because my father wasn’t dressed well enough. But what can we do? We’re very poor at home, and lots of us, and all hungry. My father says he isn’t paid very well for his services to the Government. He’s only a marine.’

‘He’s a hero!’ said De Craye.

‘He came home very tired, with a cold, and had a doctor. But Sir Willoughby did send him money, and mother wished to send it back, and my father said she was not like a woman – with our big family. He said he thought Sir Willoughby an extraordinary man.’

‘Not at all; very common; indigenous,’ said De Craye. ‘The art of cutting is one of the branches of a polite education in this country, and you’ll have to learn it, if you expect to be looked on as a gentleman and a Patterne, my boy. I begin to see how it is Miss Middleton takes to you so. Follow her directions. But I hope you did not listen to a private conversation. Miss Middleton would not approve of that.’

‘Colonel De Craye, how could I help myself? I heard a lot before I knew what it was. There was poetry!’

‘Still, Crossjay, if it was important – was it?’

The boy swelled again, and the colonel asked him, ‘Does Miss Dale know of your having played listener?’

‘She!’ said Crossjay. ‘Oh, I couldn’t tell *her*.’

He breathed thick; then came a threat of tears. ‘She wouldn’t do anything to hurt Miss Middleton. I’m sure of that. It wasn’t her fault. She – There goes Mr Whitford!’ Crossjay bounded away.

The colonel had no inclination to wait for his return. He walked fast up the road, not perspicuously conscious that his motive was to be well in advance of Vernon Whitford: to whom, after all, the knowledge imparted by Crossjay would be of small advantage. That fellow would probably trot off to Willoughby to row him for breaking his word to Miss Middleton! There are men, thought De Craye, who see nothing, feel nothing.

He crossed a stile into the wood above the lake, where, as he was in the humour to think himself signally lucky, espying her, he took it as a matter of course that the lady who taught his heart to leap should be posted by the Fates. And he wondered little at her power, for rarely had the world seen such union of princess and sylph as in that lady’s figure. She stood holding by a beech-branch, gazing down on the water.

She had not heard him. When she looked she flushed at the spectacle of one of her thousand thoughts, but she was not startled; the colour overflowed a grave face.

‘And ’tis not quite the first time that Willoughby has played this trick!’ De Craye said to her, keenly smiling with a parted mouth.

Clara moved her lips to recall remarks introductory to so abrupt and strange a plunge.

He smiled in that peculiar manner of an illuminated comic perception: for the moment he was all falcon;

and he surprised himself more than Clara, who was not in the mood to take surprises. It was the sight of her which had animated him to strike his game; he was down on it.

Another instinct at work (they spring up in twenties oftener than in twos when the heart is the hunter) prompted him to directness and quickness, to carry her on the flood of the discovery.

She regained something of her mental self-possession as soon as she was on a level with a meaning she had not yet inspected; but she had to submit to his lead, distinctly perceiving where its drift divided to the forked currents of what might be in his mind and what was in hers.

'Miss Middleton, I bear a bit of a likeness to the messenger to the glorious despot – my head is off if I speak not true! Everything I have is on the die. Did I guess wrong your wish? – I read it in the dark, by the heart. But here's a certainty: Willoughby sets you free.'

'You have come from him?' she could imagine nothing else, and she was unable to preserve a disguise; she trembled.

'From Miss Dale.'

'Ah!' Clara drooped. 'She told me that once.'

''Tis the fact that tells it now.'

'You have not seen him since you left the house?'

'Darkly: clear enough: not unlike the hand of destiny – through a veil. He offered himself to Miss Dale last night, about between the witching hours of twelve and one.'

'Miss Dale…'

'Would she other? Could she? The poor lady has languished beyond a decade. She's love in the feminine person.'

'Are you speaking seriously, Colonel De Craye?'

'Would I dare to trifle with you, Miss Middleton?'

'I have reason to know it cannot be.'

'If I have a head, it is a fresh and blooming truth. And more – I stake my vanity on it!'

'Let me go to her.' She stepped.

'Consider,' said he.

'Miss Dale and I are excellent friends. It would not seem indelicate to her. She has a kind of regard for me, through Crossjay. – Oh, can it be? There must be some delusion. You have seen – you wish to be of service to me; you may too easily be deceived. Last night? – he last night…? And this morning!'

''Tis not the first time our friend has played the trick, Miss Middleton.'

'But this is incredible, that last night… and this morning, in my father's presence, he presses!… You have seen Miss Dale? Everything is possible of him: they were together, I know. Colonel De Craye, I have not the slightest chance of concealment with you. I think I felt that when I first saw you. Will you let me hear why you are so certain?'

'Miss Middleton, when I first had the honour of looking on you, it was in a posture that necessitated my looking up, and morally so it has been since. I conceived that Willoughby had won the greatest prize of earth. And next I was led to the conclusion that he had won it to lose it. Whether he much cares, is the mystery I haven't leisure to fathom. Himself is the principal consideration with himself, and ever was.'

'You discovered it!' said Clara.

'He uncovered it,' said De Craye. 'The miracle was, that the world wouldn't see. But the world is a piggy-wiggy world for the wealthy fellow who fills a trough for it, and that he has always very sagaciously done. Only women besides myself have detected him. I have never exposed him; I have been an observer pure and simple; and because I apprehended another catastrophe – making something like the fourth, to my knowledge, one being public…'

'You knew Miss Durham?'

'And Harry Oxford too. And they're a pair as happy as blackbirds in a cherry-tree, in a summer sunrise, with the owner of the garden asleep. Because of that apprehension of mine, I refused the office of best man till Willoughby had sent me a third letter. He insisted on my coming. I came, saw, and was conquered. I trust with all my soul I did not betray myself. I owed that duty to my position of concealing it. As for entirely hiding that I had used my eyes, I can't say: they must answer for it.'

The colonel was using his eyes with an increasing suavity that threatened more than sweetness.

'I believe you have been sincerely kind,' said Clara. 'We will descend to the path round the lake.'

She did not refuse her hand on the descent, and he let it escape the moment the service was done. As he

was performing the admirable character of the man of honour, he had to attend to the observance of details; and sure of her though he was beginning to feel, there was a touch of the unknown in Clara Middleton which made him fear to stamp assurance; despite a barely resistible impulse, coming of his emotions and approved by his maxims. He looked at the hand, now a free lady's hand. Willoughby settled, his chance was great. Who else was in the way? No one. He counselled himself to wait for her; she might have ideas of delicacy. Her face was troubled, speculative; the brows clouded, the lips compressed.

'You have not heard this from Miss Dale?' she said.

'Last night they were together: this morning she fled. I saw her this morning distressed. She is unwilling to send you a message: she talks vaguely of meeting you some days hence. And it is not the first time he has gone to her for his consolation.'

'That is not a proposal,' Clara reflected. 'He is too prudent. He did not propose to her at the time you mention. Have you not been hasty, Colonel De Craye?'

Shadows crossed her forehead. She glanced in the direction of the house and stopped her walk.

'Last night, Miss Middleton, there was a listener.'

'Who?'

'Crossjay was under that pretty silk coverlet worked by the Miss Patternes. He came home late, found his door locked, and dashed downstairs into the drawing-room, where he snuggled up and dropped asleep. The two speakers woke him; they frightened the poor dear lad in his love for you, and after they had gone, he wanted to run out of the house, and I met him just after I had come back from my search, bursting, and took him to my room, and laid him on the sofa, and abused him for not lying quiet. He was restless as a fish on a bank. When I woke in the morning he was off. Doctor Corney came across him somewhere on the road and drove him to the cottage. I was ringing the bell. Corney told me the boy had you on his brain, and was miserable, so Crossjay and I had a talk.'

'Crossjay did not repeat to you the conversation he had heard?' said Clara.

'No.'

She smiled rejoicingly, proud of the boy, as she walked on. 'But you'll pardon me, Miss Middleton – and I'm for him as much as you are – if I was guilty of a little angling.'

'My sympathies are with the fish.'

'The poor fellow had a secret that hurt him. It rose to the surface crying to be hooked, and I spared him twice or thrice, because he had a sort of holy sentiment I respected, that none but Mr Whitford ought to be his father confessor.'

'Crossjay!' she cried, hugging her love of the boy.

'The secret was one not to be communicated to Miss Dale of all people.'

'He said that?'

'As good as the very words. She informed me, too, that she couldn't induce him to face her straight.'

'Oh, that looks like it. And Crossjay was unhappy? Very unhappy?'

'He was just where tears are on the brim, and would have been over, if he were not such a manly youngster.'

'It looks…' She reverted in thought to Willoughby, and doubted, and blindly stretched hands to her recollection of the strange old monster she had discovered in him. Such a man could do anything.

That conclusion fortified her to pursue her walk to the house and give battle for freedom. Willoughby appeared to her scarce human, unreadable, save by the key that she could supply. She determined to put faith in Colonel De Craye's marvellous divination of circumstances in the dark. Marvels are solid weapons when we are attacked by real prodigies of nature. Her countenance cleared. She conversed with De Craye of the polite and the political world, throwing off her personal burden completely, and charming him.

At the edge of the garden, on the bridge that crossed the ha-ha from the park, he had a second impulse, almost a warning within, to seize his heavenly opportunity to ask for thanks and move her tender lowered eyelids to hint at his reward. He repressed it, doubtful of the wisdom.

Something like 'heaven forgive me' was in Clara's mind, though she would have declared herself innocent before the scrutator.

CHAPTER 43

⌘⌘⌘⌘

In Which Sir Willoughby Is Led to Think That the Elements Have Conspired Against Him

CLARA had not taken many steps in the garden before she learned how great was her debt of gratitude to Colonel De Craye. Willoughby and her father were awaiting her. De Craye, with his ready comprehension of circumstances, turned aside unseen among the shrubs. She advanced slowly.

'The vapours, we may trust, have dispersed?' her father hailed her.

'One word, and these discussions are over, we dislike them equally,' said Willoughby.

'No scenes,' Dr Middleton added. 'Speak your decision, my girl, pro forma, seeing that he who has the right demands it, and pray release me.'

Clara looked at Willoughby.

'I have decided to go to Miss Dale for her advice.'

There was no appearance in him of a man that has been shot.

'To Miss Dale? – for advice?'

Dr Middleton invoked the Furies. 'What is the signification of this new freak?'

'Miss Dale must be consulted, papa.'

'Consulted with reference to the disposal of your hand in marriage?'

'She must be.'

'Miss Dale, do you say?'

'I do, Papa.'

Dr Middleton regained his natural elevation from the bend of body habitual with men of an established sanity, paedagogues and others, who are called on at odd intervals to inspect the magnitude of the infinitesimally absurd in human nature: small, that is, under the light of reason, immense in the realms of madness.

His daughter profoundly confused him. He swelled out his chest, remarking to Willoughby: 'I do not wonder at your scared expression of countenance, my friend. To discover yourself engaged to a girl mad as Cassandra, without a boast of the distinction of her being sun-struck, can be no specially comfortable an enlightenment. I am opposed to delays, and I will not have a breach of faith committed by daughter of mine.'

'Do not repeat those words,' Clara said to Willoughby.

He started. She had evidently come armed. But how, within so short a space? What could have instructed her? And in his bewilderment he gazed hurriedly above, gulped air, and cried: 'Scared, sir? I am not aware that my countenance can show a scare. I am not accustomed to sue for long: I am unable to sustain the part of humble supplicant. She puts me out of harmony with creation – We are plighted, Clara. It is pure waste of time to speak of soliciting advice on the subject.'

'Would it be a breach of faith for me to break my engagement?' she said.

'You ask?'

'It is a breach of sanity to propound the interrogation,' said her father.

She looked at Willoughby. 'Now?'

He shrugged haughtily.

'Since last night?' she said.

'Last night?'

'Am I not released?'

'Not by me.'

'By your act.'

'My dear Clara!'

'Have you not virtually disengaged me?'

'I who claim you as mine?'

'Can you?'

'I do and must.'

'After last night?'

‘Tricks! shufflings! Jabber of a barbarian woman upon the evolutions of a serpent!’ exclaimed Dr Middleton. ‘You were to capitulate, or to furnish reasons for your refusal. You have none. Give him your hand, girl, according to the compact. I praised you to him for returning within the allotted term, and now forbear to disgrace yourself and me.’

‘Is he perfectly free to offer his? Ask him, papa.’

‘Perform your duty. Do let us have peace!’

‘Perfectly free! as on the day when I offered it first,’ Willoughby frankly waved his honourable hand.

His face was blanched: enemies in the air seemed to have whispered things to her: he doubted the fidelity of the Powers above.

‘Since last night?’ said she.

‘Oh, if you insist, I reply, since last night.’

‘You know what I mean, Sir Willoughby.’

‘Oh, certainly.’

‘You speak the truth?’

‘ “*Sir* Willoughby!” ’ her father ejaculated in wrath. ‘But will you explain what you mean, epitome that you are of all the contradictions and mutabilities ascribed to women from the beginning! “Certainly”, he says, and knows no more than I. She begs grace for an hour, and returns with a fresh store of evasions, to insult the man she has injured. It is my humiliation to confess that our share in this contract is rescued from public ignominy by his generosity. Nor can I congratulate him on his fortune, should he condescend to bear with you to the utmost; for instead of the young woman I supposed myself to be bestowing on him, I see a fantastical planguncula[32] enlivened by the wanton tempers of a nursery chit. If one may conceive a meaning in her, in miserable apology for such behaviour, some spirit of jealousy informs the girl.’

‘I can only remark that there is no foundation for it,’ said Willoughby. ‘I am willing to satisfy you, Clara. Name the person who discomposes you. I can scarcely imagine one to exist: but who can tell?’

She could name no person. The detestable imputation of jealousy would be confirmed if she mentioned a name: and indeed Laetitia was not to be named.

He pursued his advantage: ‘Jealousy is one of the fits I am a stranger to, – I fancy, sir, that gentlemen have dismissed it. I speak for myself. – But I can make allowances. In some cases, it is considered a compliment; and often a word will soothe it. The whole affair is so senseless! However, I will enter the witness-box, or stand at the prisoner’s bar! Anything to quiet a distempered mind.’

‘Of you, sir,’ said Dr Middleton, ‘might a parent be justly proud.’

‘It is not jealousy; I could not be jealous!’ Clara cried, stung by the very passion; and she ran through her brain for a suggestion to win a sign of meltingness if not esteem from her father. She was not an iron maiden, but one among the nervous natures which live largely in the moment, though she was then sacrificing it to her nature’s deep dislike. ‘You may be proud of me again, papa.’

She could hardly have uttered anything more impolitic.

‘Optume; but deliver yourself ad rem,’ he rejoined, alarmingly pacified. ‘Firmavit fidem.[33] Do you likewise, and double on us no more like puss in the field.’

‘I wish to see Miss Dale,’ she said.

Up flew the Rev. Doctor’s arms in wrathful despair resembling an imprecation.

‘She is at the cottage. You could have seen her,’ said Willoughby.

Evidently she had not.

‘Is it untrue that last night, between twelve o’clock and one, in the drawing-room, you proposed marriage to Miss Dale?’

He became convinced that she must have stolen down-stairs during his colloquy with Laetitia, and listened at the door.

‘On behalf of old Vernon?’ he said, lightly laughing. ‘The idea is not novel, as you know. They are suited, if they could see it. – Laetitia Dale and my cousin Vernon Whitford, sir.’

‘Fairly schemed, my friend, and I will say for you, you have the patience, Willoughby, of a husband!’

Willoughby bowed to the encomium, and allowed some fatigue to be visible. He half yawned: ‘I claim no happier title, sir,’ and made light of the weariful discussion.

Clara was shaken: she feared that Crossjay had heard incorrectly, or that Colonel De Craye had guessed erroneously. It was too likely that Willoughby should have proposed Vernon to Laetitia.

There was nothing to reassure her save the vision of the panic amazement of his face at her persistency in

speaking of Miss Dale. She could have declared on oath that she was right, while admitting all the suppositions to be against her. And unhappily all the Delicacies (a doughty battalion for the defence of ladies until they enter into difficulties and are shorn of them at a blow, bare as dairy-maids), all the body-guard of a young gentlewoman, the drawing-room sylphides, which bear her train, which wreathe her hair, which modulate her voice and tone her complexion, which are arrows and shield to awe the creature man, forbade her utterance of what she felt, on pain of instant fulfilment of their oft-repeated threat of late to leave her to the last remnant of a protecting sprite. She could not, as in a dear melodrama, from the aim of a pointed finger denounce him, on the testimony of her instincts, false of speech, false in deed. She could not even declare that she doubted his truthfulness. The refuge of a sullen fit, the refuge of tears, the pretext of a mood, were denied her now by the rigour of those laws of decency which are a garment to ladies of pure breeding.

'One more respite, papa,' she implored him, bitterly conscious of the closer tangle her petition involved, and, if it must be betrayed of her, perceiving in an illumination how the knot might become so woefully Gordian that haply in a cloud of wild events the intervention of a gallant gentleman out of heaven, albeit in the likeness of one of earth, would have to cut it: her cry within, as she succumbed to weakness, being fervider, 'Anything but marry this one!' She was faint with strife and dejected, a condition in the young when their imaginative energies hold revel uncontrolled and are projectively desperate.

'No respite!' said Willoughby, genially.

'And I say, no respite!' observed her father. 'You have assumed a position that has not been granted you, Clara Middleton.'

'I cannot bear to offend you, father.'

'Him! Your duty is not to offend him. Address your excuses to him. I refuse to be dragged over the same ground, to reiterate the same command perpetually.'

'If authority is deputed to me, I claim you,' said Willoughby.

'You have not broken faith with me?'

'Assuredly not, or would it be possible for me to press my claim?'

'And join the right hand to the right,' said Dr Middleton; 'no, it would not be possible. What insane root she has been nibbling, I know not, but she must consign herself to the guidance of those whom the gods have not abandoned, until her intellect is liberated. She was once… there: I look not back – if she it was, and no simulacrum of a reasonable daughter. I welcome the appearance of my friend Mr Whitford. He is my sea-bath and supper on the beach of Troy, after the day's battle and dust.'

Vernon walked straight up to them: an act unusual with with him, for he was shy of committing an intrusion.

Clara guessed by that, and more by the dancing frown of speculative humour he turned on Willoughby, that he had come charged in support of her. His forehead was curiously lively, as of one who has got a surprise well under, to feed on its amusing contents.

'Have you seen Crossjay, Mr Whitford?' she said.

'I've pounced on Crossjay; his bones are sound.'

'Where did he sleep?'

'On a sofa, it seems.'

She smiled, with good hope – Vernon had the story.

Willoughby thought it just to himself that he should defend his measure of severity.

'The boy lied; he played a double game.'

'For which he should have been reasoned with at the Grecian portico of a boy,' said the Rev. Doctor.

'My system is different, sir. I could not inflict what I would not endure myself.'

'So is Greek excluded from the later generations; and you leave a field, the most fertile in the moralities in youth, unplowed and unsown. Ah! well. This growing too fine is our way of relapsing upon barbarism. Beware of over-sensitiveness, where nature has plainly indicated her alternative gateway of knowledge. And now, I presume, I am at liberty.'

'Vernon will excuse us for a minute or two.'

'I hold by Mr Whitford now I have him.'

'I'll join you in the laboratory, Vernon,' Willoughby nodded bluntly.

'We will leave them, Mr Whitford. They are at the time-honoured dissension upon a particular day, that, for the sake of dignity, blushes to be named.'

‘What day?’ said Vernon, like a rustic.

‘*The* day, these people call it.’

Vernon sent one of his vivid eyeshots from one to the other. His eyes fixed on Willoughby’s with a quivering glow, beyond amazement, as if his humour stood at furnace-heat, and absorbed all that came.

Willoughby motioned to him to go.

‘Have you seen Miss Dale, Mr Whitford?’ said Clara.

He answered, ‘No. Something has shocked her.’

‘Is it her feeling for Crossjay?’

‘Ah!’ Vernon said to Willoughby, ‘your pocketing of the key of Crossjay’s bedroom door was a master-stroke!’

The celestial irony suffused her, and she bathed and swam in it, on hearing its dupe reply: ‘My methods of discipline are short. I was not aware that she had been to his door.’

‘But I may hope that Miss Dale will see me,’ said Clara. ‘We are in sympathy about the boy.’

‘Mr Dale might be seen. He seems to be of a divided mind with his daughter,’ Vernon rejoined. ‘She has locked herself up in her room.’

‘He is not the only father in that unwholesome predicament,’ said Dr Middleton.

‘He talks of coming to you, Willoughby.’

‘Why to me?’ Willoughby chastened his irritation: ‘He will be welcome, of course. It would be better that the boy should come.’

‘If there is a chance of your for giving him,’ said Clara.

‘Let the Dales know I am prepared to listen to the boy, Vernon. There can be no necessity for Mr Dale to drag himself here.’

‘How are Mr Dale and his daughter of a divided mind, Mr Whitford?’ said Clara.

Vernon simulated an uneasiness. With a vacant gaze that enlarged around Willoughby and was more discomforting than intentness, he replied: ‘Perhaps she is unwilling to give him her entire confidence, Miss Middleton.’

‘In which respect, then, our situations present their solitary point of unlikeness in resemblance, for I have it in excess,’ observed Dr Middleton.

Clara dropped her eyelids for the wave to pass over. ‘It struck me that Miss Dale was a person of the extremest candour.’

‘Why should we be prying into the domestic affairs of the Dales?’ Willoughby interjected, and drew out his watch, merely for a diversion; he was on tiptoe to learn whether Vernon was as well instructed as Clara, and hung to the view that he could not be, while drenching in the sensation that he was: – and if so, what were the Powers above but a body of conspirators? He paid Laetitia that compliment. He could not conceive the human betrayal of the secret. Clara’s discovery of it had set his common sense adrift.

‘The domestic affairs of the Dales do not concern me,’ said Vernon.

‘And yet, my friend,’ Dr Middleton balanced himself, and with an air of benevolent slyness the import of which did not awaken Willoughby, until too late, remarked: ‘They might concern you. I will even add, that there is a probability of your being not less than the fount and origin of this division of father and daughter, though Willoughby in the drawing-room last night stands accusably the agent.’

‘Favour me, sir, with an explanation,’ said Vernon, seeking to gather it from Clara.

Dr Middleton threw the explanation upon Willoughby.

Clara communicated as much as she was able in one of those looks of still depth which say, Think! and without causing a thought to stir, takes us into the pellucid mind.

Vernon was enlightened before Willoughby had spoken. His mouth shut rigidly, and there was a springing increase of the luminous wavering of his eyes. Some star that Clara had watched at night was like them in the vivid wink and overflow of its light. Yet, as he was perfectly sedate, none could have suspected his blood to be chasing wild with laughter, and his frame strung to the utmost to keep it from volleying. So happy was she in his aspect, that her chief anxiety was to recover the name of the star whose shining beckons and speaks, and is in the quick of spirit-fire. It is the sole star which on a night of frost and strong moonlight preserves an indomitable fervency: that she remembered, and the picture of a hoar earth and a lean Orion in flooded heavens, and the star beneath Eastward of him: but the name! the name! – She heard Willoughby indistinctly.

‘Oh, the old story; another effort; you know my wish; a failure, of course, and no thanks on either side, I

suppose I must ask your excuse. – They neither of them see what's good for them, sir.'

'Manifestly, however,' said Dr Middleton, 'if one may opine from the division we have heard of, the father is disposed to back your nominee.'

'I can't say; as far as I am concerned, I made a mess of it.'

Vernon withstood the incitement to acquiesce, but he sparkled with his recognition of the fact.

'You meant well, Willoughby.'

'I hope so, Vernon.'

'Only you have driven her away.'

'We must resign ourselves.'

'It won't affect me, for I'm off to-morrow.'

'You see, sir, the thanks I get.'

'Mr Whitford,' said Dr Middleton, 'you have a tower of strength in the lady's father.'

'Would you have me bring it to bear upon the lady, sir?'

'Wherefore not?'

'To make her marriage a matter of obedience to her father?'

'Ay, my friend, a lusty lover would have her gladly on those terms, well knowing it to be for the lady's good. What do you say, Willoughby?'

'Sir! Say? What can I say? Miss Dale has not plighted her faith. Had she done so, she is a lady who would never dishonour it.'

'She is an ideal of constancy, who would keep to it though it had been broken on the other side,' said Vernon, and Clara thrilled.

'I take that, sir, to be a statue of constancy, modelled upon which a lady of our flesh may be proclaimed as graduating for the condition of idiocy,' said Dr Middleton.

'But faith is faith, sir.'

'But the broken is the broken, sir, whether in porcelain or in human engagements; and all that one of the two continuing faithful, I should rather say, regretful, can do, is to devote the remainder of life to the picking up of the fragments; an occupation properly to be pursued, for the comfort of mankind, within the enclosure of an appointed asylum.'

'You destroy the poetry of sentiment, Dr Middleton.'

'To invigorate the poetry of nature, Mr Whitford.'

'Then you maintain, sir, that when faith is broken by one, the engagement ceases, and the other is absolutely free?'

'I do; I am the champion of that platitude, and sound that knell to the sentimental world; and since you have chosen to defend it, I will appeal to Willoughby, and ask him if he would not side with the world of good sense in applauding the nuptials of man or maid married within a month of a jilting?'

Clara slipped her arm under her father's.

'Poetry, sir,' said Willoughby, 'I never have been hypocrite enough to pretend to understand or care for.'

Dr Middleton laughed. Vernon too seemed to admire his cousin for a reply that rung in Clara's ears as the dullest ever spoken. Her arm grew cold on her father's. She began to fear Willoughby again.

He depended entirely on his agility to elude the thrusts that assailed him. Had he been able to believe in the treachery of the Powers above, he would at once have seen design in these deadly strokes, for his feelings had rarely been more acute than at the present crisis; and he would then have led away Clara, to wrangle it out with her, relying on Vernon's friendliness not to betray him to her father: but a wrangle with Clara promised no immediate fruits, nothing agreeable; and the lifelong trust he had reposed in his protecting genii obscured his intelligence to evidence he would otherwise have accepted on the spot, on the faith of his delicate susceptibility to the mildest impressions which wounded him. Clara might have stooped to listen at the door: she might have heard sufficient to create a suspicion. But Vernon was not in the house last night; she could not have communicated it to him, and he had not seen Laetitia, who was, besides trustworthy, an admirable if a foolish and ill-fated woman.

Preferring to consider Vernon a pragmatical moralist played upon by a sententious drone, he thought it politic to detach them, and vanquish Clara while she was in the beaten mood, as she had appeared before Vernon's vexatious arrival.

'I'm afraid, my dear fellow, you are rather too dainty and fussy for a very successful wooer,' he said. 'It's beautiful on paper, and absurd in life. We have a bit of private business to discuss. We will go inside, sir, I

think. I will soon release you.'

Clara pressed her father's arm.

'More?' said he.

'Five minutes. There's a slight delusion to clear, sir. My dear Clara, you will see with different eyes.'

'Papa wishes to work with Mr Whitford.'

Her heart sunk to hear her father say: 'No,'tis a lost morning. I must consent to pay tax of it for giving another young woman to the world. I have a daughter! You will, I hope, compensate me, Mr Whitford, in the afternoon. Be not downcast. I have observed you meditative of late. You will have no clear brain so long as that stuff is on the mind. I could venture to propose to do some pleading for you, should it be needed for the prompter expedition of the affair.'

Vernon briefly thanked him, and said:

'Willoughby has exerted all his eloquence, and you see the result: you have lost Miss Dale and I have not won her. He did everything that one man can do for another in so delicate a case: even to the repeating of her famous birthday verses to him, to flatter the poetess. His best efforts were foiled by the lady's indisposition for me.'

'Behold,' said Dr Middleton, as Willoughby, electrified by the mention of the verses, took a sharp stride or two, 'you have in him an advocate who will not be rebuffed by one refusal, and I can affirm that he is tenacious, pertinacious as are few. Justly so. Not to believe in a lady's No is the approved method of carrying that fortress built to yield. Although unquestionably to have a young man pleading in our interests with a lady counts its objections. Yet Willoughby being notoriously engaged, may be held to enjoy the privileges of his elders.'

'As an engaged man, sir, he was on a level with his elders in pleading on my behalf with Miss Dale,' said Vernon.

Willoughby strode and muttered. Providence had grown mythical in his thoughts, if not malicious: and it is the peril of this worship that the object will wear such an alternative aspect when it appears no longer subservient.

'Are we coming, sir?' he said, and was unheeded. The Rev. Doctor would not be defrauded of rolling his billow.

'As an honourable gentleman faithful to his own engagement and desirous of establishing his relatives, he deserves, in my judgement, the lady's esteem as well as your cordial thanks; nor should a temporary failure dishearten either of you, notwithstanding the precipitate retreat of the lady from Patterne, and her seclusion in her sanctum on the occasion of your recent visit.'

'Supposing he had succeeded,' said Vernon, driving Willoughby to frenzy, 'should I have been bound to marry?'

Matter for cogitation was offered to Dr Middleton.

'The proposal was without your sanction?'

'Entirely.'

'You admire the lady?'

'Respectfully.'

'You do not incline to the state?'

'An inch of an angle would exaggerate my inclination.'

'How long are we to stand and hear this insufferable nonsense you talk?' cried Willoughby.

'But if Mr Whitford was not consulted…' Dr Middleton said, and was overborne by Willoughby's hurried, 'Oblige me, sir. – Oblige me, my good fellow!' He swept his arm to Vernon, and gestured a conducting hand to Clara.

'Here is Mrs Mountstuart!' she exclaimed.

Willoughby stared. Was it an irruption of a friend or a foe? He doubted, and stood petrified between the double question.

Clara had seen Mrs Mountstuart and Colonel De Craye separating: and now the great lady sailed along the sward like a royal barge in festival trim.

She looked friendly, but friendly to everybody, which was always a frost on Willoughby, and terribly friendly to Clara.

Coming up to her she whispered: 'News, indeed! Wonderful! I could not credit his hint of it yesterday. Are you satisfied?'

‘Pray, Mrs Mountstuart, take an opportunity to speak to papa,’ Clara whispered in return.

Mrs Mountstuart bowed to Dr Middleton, nodded to Vernon, and swam upon Willoughby, with, ‘Is it? But *is* it? Am I really to believe? You have? My dear Sir Willoughby? Really?’

The confounded gentleman heaved on a bare plank of wreck in mid sea.

He could oppose only a paralyzed smile to the assault.

His intuitive discretion taught him to fall back a step while she said, ‘So!’ the plummet word of our mysterious deep fathoms; and he fell back further saying, ‘Madam?’ in a tone advising her to speak low.

She recovered her volubility, followed his partial retreat, and dropped her voice,—

‘Impossible to have imagined it as an actual fact! You were always full of surprises, but this! this! Nothing manlier, nothing more gentlemanly has ever been done: nothing: nothing that so completely changes an untenable situation into a comfortable and proper footing for everybody. It is what I like: it is what I love: – sound sense! Men are so selfish: one cannot persuade them to be reasonable in such positions. But you, Sir Willoughby, have shown wisdom and sentiment: the rarest of all combinations in men.’

‘Where have you –’ Willoughby contrived to say.

‘Heard? The hedges, the housetops, everywhere. All the neighbourhood will have it before nightfall. Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer will soon be rushing here, and declaring they never expected anything else, I do not doubt. I am not so pretentious. I beg your excuse for that “twice” of mine yesterday. Even if it hurt my vanity, I should be happy to confess my error: I was utterly out. But then I did not reckon on a fatal attachment, I thought men were incapable of it. I thought we women were the only poor creatures persecuted by a fatality. It *is* a fatality! You tried hard to escape, indeed you did. And she will do honour to your final surrender, my dear friend. She is gentle, and very clever, very: she is devoted to you: she will entertain excellently. I see her like a flower in sunshine. She will expand to a perfect hostess. Patterne will shine under her reign; you have my warrant for that. And so will you. Yes, you flourish best when adored. It must be adoration. You have been under a cloud of late. Years ago I said it was a match, when no one supposed you could stoop. Lady Busshe would have it was a screen, and she was deemed high wisdom. The world will be with you. All the women will be: excepting, of course, Lady Busshe, whose pride is in prophecy; and she will soon be too glad to swell the host. There, my friend, your sincerest and oldest admirer congratulates you. I could not contain myself; I was compelled to pour forth. And now I must go and be talked to by Dr Middleton. How does he take it? They leave?’

‘He is perfectly well,’ said Willoughby, aloud, quite distraught.

She acknowledged his just correction of her for running on to an extreme in low-toned converse, though they stood sufficiently isolated from the others. These had by this time been joined by Colonel De Craye, and were all chatting in a group – of himself, Willoughby horribly suspected.

Clara was gone from him! Gone! but he remembered his oath and vowed it again: not to Horace de Craye! She was gone, lost, sunk into the world of waters of rival men, and he determined that his whole force should be used to keep her from that man, the false friend who had supplanted him in her shallow heart, and might, if he succeeded, boast of having done it by simply appearing on the scene.

Willoughby intercepted Mrs Mountstuart as she was passing over to Dr Middleton. ‘My dear lady! spare me a minute.’

De Craye sauntered up, with a face of the friendliest humour: ‘Never was man like you, Willoughby, for shaking new patterns in a kaleidoscope.’

‘Have you turned punster, Horace?’ Willoughby replied, smarting to find yet another in the demon secret, and he draw Dr Middleton two or three steps aside, and hurriedly begged him to abstain from prosecuting the subject with Clara. ‘We must try to make her happy as we best can, sir. She may have her reasons – a young lady’s reasons!’ He laughed, and left the Rev. Doctor considering within himself under the arch of his lofty frown of stupefaction.

De Craye smiled slyly and winningly as he shadowed a deep droop on the bend of his head before Clara, signifying his absolute devotion to her service, and this present good fruit for witness of his merits.

She smiled sweetly though vaguely. There was no concealment of their intimacy.

‘The battle is over,’ Vernon said quietly, when Willoughby had walked some paces beside Mrs Mountstuart, adding: ‘You may expect to see Mr Dale here. He knows.’

Vernon and Clara exchanged one look, hard on his part, in contrast with her softness, and he proceeded to the house.

De Craye waited for a word or a promising look. He was patient, being self-assured, and passed on.

Clara linked her arm with her father’s once more, and said, on a sudden brightness: ‘Sirius, papa!’

He repeated it in the profoundest manner: ‘Sirius! And is there,’ he asked, ‘a feminine scintilla of sense in that?’

‘It is the name of the star I was thinking of, dear papa.’

‘It was the star observed by King Agamemnon before the sacrifice in Aulis. You were thinking of that? But, my love, my Iphigenia, you have not a father who will insist on sacrificing you.’

‘Did I hear him tell you to humour me, papa?’

Dr Middleton humphed.

‘Verily the dog-star rages in many heads,’ he responded.

CHAPTER 44

Dr Middleton: the Ladies Eleanor and Isabel: and Mr Dale

CLARA looked up at the flying clouds. She travelled with them now, and tasted freedom, but she prudently forbore to vex her father; she held herself in reserve.

They were summoned by the midday bell.

Few were speakers at the meal, few were eaters. Clara was impelled to join it by her desire to study Mrs Mountstuart’s face. Willoughby was obliged to preside. It was a meal of an assembly of mutes and plates, that struck the ear like the well-known sound of a collection of offerings in church after an impressive exhortation from the pulpit. A sally of Colonel De Craye’s met the reception given to a charity-boy’s muffled burst of animal spirits in the silence of the sacred edifice. Willoughby tried politics with Dr Middleton, whose regular appetite preserved him from uncongenial speculations when the hour for appeasing it had come; and he alone did honour to the dishes, replying to his host:

‘Times are bad, you say, and we have a Ministry doing with us what they will. Well, sir, and that being so, and opposition a manner of kicking them into greater stability, it is the time for wise men to retire within themselves, with the steady determination of the seed in the earth to grow. Repose upon nature, sleep in firm faith, and abide the seasons. That is my counsel to the weaker party.’

The counsel was excellent, but it killed the topic.

Dr Middleton’s appetite was watched for the signal to rise and breathe freely; and such is the grace accorded to a good man of an untroubled conscience engaged in doing his duty to himself, that he perceived nothing of the general restlessness; he went through the dishes calmly, and as calmly he quoted Milton to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, when the company sprung up all at once upon his closing his repast. Vernon was taken away from him by Willoughby. Mrs Mountstuart beckoned covertly to Clara. Willoughby should have had something to say to him, Dr Middleton thought: the position was not clear. But the situation was not disagreeable; and he was in no serious hurry, though he wished to be enlightened.

‘This,’ Dr Middleton said to the spinster aunts, as he accompanied them to the drawing-room, ‘shall be no lost day for me if I may devote the remainder of it to you.’

‘The thunder, we fear, is not remote,’ murmured one.

‘We fear it is imminent,’ sighed the other.

They took to chanting in alternation.

‘– We are accustomed to peruse our Willoughby, and we know him by a shadow.’

‘– From his infancy to his glorious youth and his established manhood.’

‘– He was ever the soul of chivalry.’

‘– Duty: duty first. The happiness of his family. The wellbeing of his dependants.’

‘– If proud of his name it was not an overweening pride; it was founded in the conscious possession of exalted qualities.’

‘– He could be humble when occasion called for it.’

Dr Middleton bowed to the litany, feeling that occasion called for humbleness from him.

‘Let us hope…!’ he said, with unassumed penitence on behalf of his inscrutable daughter.

The ladies resumed:

‘– Vernon Whitford, not of his blood, is his brother!’

‘– A thousand instances! Laetitia Dale remembers them better than we.’

‘– That any blow should strike him!’

‘– That another should be in store for him!’

‘– It seems impossible he can be quite misunderstood!’

‘Let us hope…!’ said Dr Middleton.

‘– One would not deem it too much for the dispenser of goodness to expect to be a little looked up to!’

‘– When he was a child he one day mounted a chair, and there he stood in danger, would not let us touch him, because he was taller than we, and we were to gaze. Do you remember him, Eleanor? “I am the sun of the house!” It was inimitable!’

‘– Your feelings; he would have your feelings! He was fourteen when his cousin Grace Whitford married, and we lost him. They had been the greatest friends; and it was long before he appeared among us. He has never cared to see her since.’

‘–But he has befriended her husband. Never has he failed in generosity. His only fault is –’

‘– His sensitiveness. And that is –’

‘– His secret. And that –’

‘– You are not to discover! It is the same with him in manhood. No one will accuse Willoughby Patterne of a deficiency of manlinesss: but what is it? – he suffers as none suffer if he is not loved. He himself is unalterably constant in affection.’

‘– What it is no one can say. We have lived with him all his life, and we know him ready to make any sacrifice; only, he does demand the whole heart in return. And if he doubts, he looks as we have seen him to-day.’

‘– Shattered: as we have never seen him look before.’

‘We will hope,’ said Dr Middleton, this time hastily. He tingled to say, ‘what it was’: he had it in him to solve perplexity in their inquiry. He did say, adopting familiar speech to suit the theme, ‘You know, ladies, we English come of a rough stock. A dose of rough dealing in our youth does us no harm, braces us. Otherwise we are likely to feel chilly: we grow too fine where tenuity of stature is necessarily buffeted by gales, namely, in our self-esteem. We are barbarians, on a forcing soil of wealth, in a conservatory of comfortable security; but still barbarians. So, you see, we shine at our best when we are plucked out of that, to where hard blows are given, in a state of war. In a state of war we are at home, our men are high-minded fellows, Scipios and good legionaries. In the state of peace we do not live in peace: our native roughness breaks out in unexpected places, under extraordinary aspects – tyrannies, extravagances, domestic exactions: and if we have not had sharp early training… within and without… the old-fashioned island-instrument to drill into us the civilization of our masters, the ancients, we show it by running here and there to some excess. Ahem. Yet,’ added the Rev. Doctor, abandoning his effort to deliver a weighty truth obscurely for the comprehension of dainty spinster ladies, the superabundance of whom in England was in his opinion largely the cause of our decay as a people, ‘Yet I have not observed this ultra-sensitiveness in Willoughby. He has borne to hear more than I, certainly no example of the frailty, could have endured.’

‘He concealed it,’ said the ladies. ‘It is intense.’

‘Then is it a disease?’

‘It bears no explanation; it is mystic.’

‘It is a cultus, then, a form of self-worship.’

‘Self!’ they ejaculated. ‘But is not Self indifferent to others? Is it Self that craves for sympathy, love, and devotion?’

‘He is an admirable host, ladies.’

‘He is admirable in all respects.’

‘Admirable must he be who can impress discerning women, his life-long housemates, so favourably. He is, I repeat, a perfect host.’

‘He will be a perfect husband.’

‘In all probability.’

‘It is a certainty. Let him be loved and obeyed, he will be guided. That is the secret for her whom he so fatally loves. That, if we had dared, we would have hinted to her. She will rule him through her love of him, and through him all about her. And it will not be a rule he submits to, but a love he accepts. If she could see it!’

‘– If she were a metaphysician!’ sighed Dr Middleton.

‘– But a sensitiveness so keen as his might –’

‘– Fretted by an unsympathizing mate –’

‘– In the end become, for the best of us is mortal –’

‘– Callous!’

‘– He would feel perhaps as much –’

‘– Or more –’

‘– He would still be tender –’

‘– But he might grow outwardly hard!’

Both ladies looked up at Dr Middleton, as they revealed the dreadful prospect.

‘It is the story told of corns!’ he said, sad as they.

The three stood drooping: the ladies with an attempt to digest his remark; the Rev. Doctor in dejection lest his gallantry should no longer continue to wrestle with his good sense.

He was rescued.

The door opened and a footman announced:

‘Mr Dale.’

Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel made a sign to one another of raising their hands.

They advanced to him, and welcomed him.

‘Pray be seated, Mr Dale. You have not brought us bad news of our Laetitia?’

‘So rare is the pleasure of welcoming you here, Mr Dale, that we are in some alarm, when, as we trust, it should be matter for unmixed congratulation.’

‘Has Doctor Corney been doing wonders?’

‘I am indebted to him for the drive to your house, ladies,’ said Mr Dale, a spare, close-buttoned gentleman, with an Indian complexion deadened in the sick-chamber. ‘It is unusual for me to stir from my precincts.’

‘The Rev. Dr Middleton.’

Mr Dale bowed. He seemed surprised.

‘You live in a splendid air, sir,’ observed the Rev. doctor.

‘I can profit little by it, sir,’ replied Mr Dale. He asked the ladies: ‘Will Sir Willoughby be disengaged?’

They consulted. ‘He is with Vernon. We will send to him.’

The bell was rung.

‘I have had the gratification of making the acquaintance of your daughter, Mr Dale, a most estimable lady,’ said Dr Middleton.

Mr Dale bowed. ‘She is honoured by your praises, sir. To the best of my belief – I speak as a father – she merits them. Hitherto I have had no doubts.’

‘Of Laetitia?’ exclaimed the ladies; and spoke of her as gentleness and goodness incarnate.

‘Hitherto I have devoutly thought so,’ said Mr Dale.

‘Surely she is the very sweetest nurse, the most devoted of daughters.’

‘As far as concerns her duty to her father, I can say she is that, ladies.’

‘In all her relations, Mr Dale!’

‘It is my prayer,’ he said.

The footman appeared. He announced that Sir Willoughby was in the laboratory with Mr Whitford, and the door locked.

‘Domestic business,’ the ladies remarked. ‘You know Willoughby’s diligent attention to affairs, Mr Dale.’

‘He is well?’ Mr Dale inquired.

‘In excellent health.’

‘Body and mind?’

‘But, dear Mr Dale, he is never ill.’

‘Ah! for one to hear that who is never well! And Mr Whitford is quite sound?’

‘Sound? The question alarms me for myself,’ said Dr Middleton. ‘Sound as our Constitution, the Credit of the country, the reputation of our Prince of poets. I pray you to have no fears for him.’

Mr Dale gave the mild little sniff of a man thrown deeper into perplexity.

He said: ‘Mr Whitford works his head; he is a hard student; he may not be always, if I may so put it, at home on worldly affairs.’

‘Dismiss that defamatory legend of the student, Mr Dale; and take my word for it, that he who persistently works his head has the strongest for all affairs.’

‘Ah! Your daughter, sir, is here?’

‘My daughter is here, sir, and will be most happy to present her respects to the father of her friend, Miss Dale.’

‘They are friends?’

‘Very cordial friends.’

Mr Dale administered another feebly pacifying sniff to himself.

‘Laetitia!’ he sighed, in apostrophe, and swept his forehead with a hand seen to shake.

The ladies asked him anxiously whether he felt the heat of the room; and one offered him a smelling-bottle.

He thanked them. ‘I can hold out until Sir Willoughby comes.’

‘We fear to disturb him when his door is locked, Mr Dale; but, if you wish it, we will venture on a message. You have really no bad news of our Laetitia? She left us hurriedly this morning, without any leave-taking, except a word to one of the maids, that your condition required her immediate presence.’

‘My condition! And now her door is locked to me! We have spoken through the door, and that is all. I stand sick and stupefied between two locked doors, neither of which will open, it appears, to give me the enlightenment I need more than medicine.’

‘Dear me!’ cried Dr Middleton, ‘I am struck by your description of your position, Mr Dale. It would aptly apply to our humanity of the present generation; and were these the days when I sermonized, I could propose that it should afford me an illustration for the pulpit. For my part, when doors are closed I try not their locks; and I attribute my perfect equanimity, health even, to an uninquiring acceptation of the fact that they are closed to me. I read my page by the light I have. On the contrary, the world of this day, if I may presume to quote you for my purpose, is heard knocking at those two locked doors of the secret of things on each side of us, and is beheld standing sick and stupefied because it has got no response to its knocking. Why, sir, let the world compare the diverse fortunes of the beggar and the postman: knock to give, and it is opened unto you: knock to crave, and it continues, shut. I say, carry a letter to your locked door, and you shall have a good reception: but there is none that is handed out. For which reason…’

Mr Dale swept a perspiring forehead, and extended his hand in supplication. ‘I am an invalid, Dr Middleton,’ he said. ‘I am unable to cope with analogies. I have but strength for the slow digestion of facts.’

‘For facts, we are bradypeptics to a man, sir. We know not yet if nature be a fact or an effort to master one. The world has not yet assimilated the first fact it stepped on. We are still in the endeavour to make good blood of the fact of our being.’

Pressing his hands at his temples, Mr Dale moaned: ‘My head twirls; I did unwisely to come out. I came on an impulse; I trust, honourable. I am unfit – I cannot follow you, Dr Middleton. Pardon me.’

‘Nay, sir, let me say, from my experience of my countrymen, that if you do not follow me and can abstain from abusing me in consequence, you are magnanimous,’ the Rev. Doctor replied, hardly consenting to let go the man he had found to indemnify him for his gallant service of acquiescing as a mute to the ladies, though he knew his breathing robustfulness to be as an East wind to weak nerves, and himself an engine of punishment when he had been torn for a day from his books.

Miss Eleanor said: ‘The enlightenment you need, Mr Dale? Can we enlighten you?’

‘I think not,’ he answered, faintly. ‘I think I will wait for Sir Willoughby… or Mr Whitford. If I can keep my strength. Or could I exchange – I fear to break down – two words with the young lady who is, was…’

‘Miss Middleton, my daughter, sir? She shall be at your disposition; I will bring her to you.’ Dr Middleton stopped at the window. ‘She, it is true, may better know the mind of Miss Dale than I. But I flatter myself I know the gentleman better. I think, Mr Dale, addressing you as the lady’s father, you will find me a persuasive, I could be an impassioned, advocate in his interests.’

Mr Dale was confounded; the weakly sapling caught in a gust falls back as he did.

‘Advocate?’ he said. He had little breath.

‘His impassioned advocate, I repeat; for I have the highest opinion of him. You see, sir, I am acquainted with the circumstances. I believe,’ Dr Middleton half turned to the ladies, ‘we must, until your potent inducements, Mr Dale, have been joined to my instances, and we overcome what feminine scruples there may be, treat the circumstances as not generally public. Our Strephon may be chargeable with shyness. But

if for the present it is incumbent on us, in proper consideration for the parties, not to be nominally precise, it is hardly requisite in this household that we should be. He is now for protesting indifference to the state. I fancy we understand that phase of amatory frigidity. Frankly, Mr Dale, I was once in my life myself refused by a lady, and I was not indignant, merely indifferent to the marriage-tie.'

'My daughter *has* refused him, sir?'

'Temporarily it would appear that she has declined the proposal.'

'He was at liberty…? he could honourably…?'

'His best friend and nearest relative is your guarantee.'

'I know it; I hear so; I am informed of that: I have heard of the proposal, and that he could honourably make it. Still, I am helpless, I cannot move, until I am assured that my daughter's reasons are such as a father need not underline.'

'Does the lady, perchance, equivocate?'

'I have not seen her this morning; I rise late. I hear an astounding account of the cause for her departure from Patterne, and I find her door locked to me – no answer.'

'It is that she had no reasons to give, and she feared the demand for them.'

'Ladies!' dolorously exclaimed Mr Dale.

'We guess the secret, we guess it!' they exclaimed in reply; and they looked smilingly, as Dr Middleton looked.

'She had no reasons to give?' Mr Dale spelled these words to his understanding. 'Then, sir, she knew you not adverse?'

'Undoubtedly, by my high esteem for the gentleman, she must have known me not adverse. But she would not consider me a principal. She could hardly have conceived me an obstacle. I am simply the gentleman's friend. A zealous friend, let me add.'

Mr Dale put out an imploring hand; it was too much for him.

'Pardon me; I have a poor head. And your daughter the same, sir?'

'We will not measure it too closely, but I may say, my daughter the same, sir. And likewise – may I not add – these ladies.'

Mr Dale made sign that he was overfilled. 'Where am I! And Laetitia refused him?'

'Temporarily, let us assume. Will it not partly depend on you, Mr Dale?'

'But what strange things have been happening during my daughter's absence from the cottage!' cried Mr Dale, betraying an elixir in his veins. 'I feel that I could laugh if I did not dread to be thought insane. She refused his hand, and he was at liberty to offer it? My girl! We are all on our heads. The fairy-tales were right and the lesson-books were wrong. But it is really, it is really very demoralizing. An invalid – and I am one, and no momentary exhilaration will be taken for the contrary – clings to the idea of stability, order. The slightest disturbance of the wonted course of things unsettles him. Why, for years I have been prophesying it! and for years I have had everything against me, and now when it is confirmed, I am wondering that I must not call myself a fool!'

'And for years, dear Mr Dale, this union, in spite of counter-currents and human arrangements, has been our Willoughby's constant preoccupation,' said Miss Eleanor.

'His most cherished aim,' said Miss Isabel.

'The name was not spoken by me,' said Dr Middleton. 'But it is out, and perhaps better out, if we would avoid the chance of mystifications. I do not suppose we are seriously committing a breach of confidence, though he might have wished to mention it to you first himself. I have it from Willoughby that last night he appealed to your daughter, Mr Dale – not for the first time, if I apprehend him correctly; and unsuccessfully. He despairs. I do not: supposing, that is, your assistance vouchsafed to us. And I do not despair, because the gentleman is a gentleman of worth, of acknowledged worth. You know him well enough to grant me that. I will bring you my daughter to help me in sounding his praises.'

Dr Middleton stepped through the window to the lawn on an elastic foot, beaming with the happiness he felt charged to confer on his friend Mr Whitford.

'Ladies! it passes all wonders,' Mr Dale gasped.

'Willoughby's generosity does pass all wonders,' they said in chorus.

The door opened; Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer were announced.

CHAPTER 45

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The Patterne Ladies: Mr Dale: Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer: with Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson

LADY BUSSHE and Lady Culmer entered spying to right and left. At the sight of Mr Dale in the room Lady Busshe murmured to her friend: 'Confirmation!'

Lady Culmer murmured: 'Corney is quite reliable.'

'The man is his own best tonic.'

'He is in valuable for the country.'

Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel greeted them.

The amiability of the Patterne ladies combined with their total eclipse behind their illustrious nephew invited enterprising women of the world to take liberties, and they were not backward.

Lady Busshe said: 'Well? the news! we have the outlines. Don't be astonished: we know the points: we have heard the gun. I could have told you as much yesterday. I *saw* it. And I guessed it the day before. Oh, I do believe in fatalities now. Lady Culmer and I agree to take that view: it is the simplest. Well, and are you satisfied, my dears?'

The ladies grimaced interrogatively: 'With what?'

'With it? with all! with her! with him!'

'Our Willoughby?'

'Can it be possible that they require a dose of Corney?' Lady Busshe remarked to Lady Culmer.

'They play discretion to perfection,' said Lady Culmer. 'But, my dears, we are in the secret.'

'How did she behave?' whispered Lady Busshe. 'No high flights and flutters, I do hope. She was well-connected, they say; though I don't comprehend what they mean by a line of scholars – one thinks of a row of pinafores: and she was pretty. That is well enough at the start. It never will stand against brains. He had the two in the house to contrast them, and… the result! A young woman with brains – in a house – beats all your beauties. Lady Culmer and I have determined on that view. He thought her a delightful partner for a dance, and found her rather tiresome at the end of the gallopade. I saw it yesterday, clear as daylight. She did not understand him, and he did understand her. That will be our report.'

'She is young: she will learn,' said the ladies uneasily, but in total ignorance of her meaning.

'And you are charitable, and always were. I remember you had a good word for that girl Durham.'

Lady Busshe crossed the room to Mr Dale, who was turning over leaves of a grand book of the heraldic devices of our great Families.

'Study it,' she said, 'study it, my dear Mr Dale; you are in it, by right of possessing a clever and accomplished daughter. At page 300 you will find the Patterne crest. And mark me, she will drag you into the peerage before she has done – relatively, you know. Sir Willoughby and wife will not be contented to sit down and manage the estates. Has not Laetitia immense ambition? And very creditable, I say.'

Mr Dale tried to protest something. He shut the book, examining the binding, flapped the cover with a finger, hoped her ladyship was in good health, alluded to his own and the strangeness of the bird out of the cage.

'You will probably take up your residence here, in a larger and handsomer cage, Mr Dale.'

He shook his head. 'Do I apprehend…' he said.

'I *know*,' said she.

'Dear me, can it be?'

Mr Dale gazed upward, with the feelings of one awakened late to see a world alive in broad daylight.

Lady Busshe dropped her voice. She took the liberty permitted to her with an inferior in station, while treating him to a tone of familiarity in acknowledgment of his expected rise; which is high breeding, or the exact measurement of social dues.

'Laetitia will be happy, you may be sure. I love to see a long and faithful attachment rewarded – love it! Her tale is the triumph of patience. Far above Grizzel! No woman will be ashamed of pointing to Lady Patterne. You are uncertain? You are in doubt? Let me hear – as low as you like. But there is no doubt of the new shifting of the scene? – no doubt of the proposal? Dear Mr Dale! a very little louder. You are here

because –? of course you wish to see Sir Willoughby. She? I did not catch you quite. She?… it seems, you say…?

Lady Culmer said to the Patterne ladies:

'You must have had a distressing time. These affairs always mount up to a climax, unless people are very wellbred. We saw it coming. Naturally we did not expect such a transformation of brides: who could? If I had laid myself down on my back to think, I should have had it. I am unerring when I set to speculating on my back. One is cooler: ideas come; they have not to be forced. That is why I am brighter on a dull winter afternoon, on the sofa, beside my tea-service, than at any other season. However, your trouble is over. When did the Middletons leave?'

'The Middletons leave?' said the ladies.

'Dr Middleton and his daughter.'

'They have not left us.'

'The Middletons are here?'

'They are here, yes. Why should they have left Patterne?'

'Why?'

'Yes. They are likely to stay some days longer.'

'Goodness!'

'There is no ground for any report to the contrary, Lady Culmer.'

'No ground!'

Lady Culmer called out to Lady Busshe.

A cry came back from that startled dame.

'She has refused him!'

'Who?'

'*She* has.'

'She? – Sir Willoughby?'

'Refused! – declines the honour.'

'Oh, never! No, that carries the incredible beyond romance. But is he perfectly at…'

'Quite, it seems. And she was asked in due form and refused.'

'No, and no again!'

'My dear, I have it from Mr Dale.'

'Mr Dale, what can be the signification of her conduct?'

'Indeed, Lady Culmer,' said Mr Dale, not unpleasantly agitated by the interest he excited, in spite of his astonishment at a public discussion of the matter in this house, 'I am in the dark. Her father should know, but I do not. Her door is locked to me; I have not seen her. I am absolutely in the dark. I am a recluse. I have forgotten the ways of the world. I should have supposed her father would first have been addressed.'

'Tut-tut. Modern gentlemen are not so formal; they are creatures of impulse and take a pride in it. He spoke. We settle that. But where did you get this tale of a refusal?'

'I have it from Dr Middleton.'

'From Dr Middleton?' shouted Lady Busshe.

'The Middletons are here,' said Lady Culmer.

'What whirl are we in?' Lady Busshe got up, ran two or three steps and seated herself in another chair. 'Oh! do let us proceed upon system. If not we shall presently be rageing; we shall be dangerous. The Middletons are here, and Dr Middleton himself communicates to Mr Dale that Laetitia Dale has refused the hand of Sir Willoughby, who is ostensibly engaged to his own daughter! And pray, Mr Dale, how did Dr Middleton speak of it? Compose yourself; there is no violent hurry, though our sympathy with you and our interest in all the parties does perhaps agitate us a little. Quite at your leisure – speak!'

'Madam… Lady Busshe.' Mr Dale gulped a ball in his

throat. 'I see no reason why I should not speak. I do not see how I can have been deluded. The Miss Patternes heard him. Dr Middleton began upon it, not I. I was unaware, when I came, that it was a refusal. I had been informed that there was a proposal. My authority for the tale was positive. The object of my visit was to assure myself of the integrity of my daughter's conduct. She had always the highest sense of honour. But passion is known to mislead, and there was this most strange report. I feared that our humblest apologies were due to Dr Middleton and his daughter. I know the charm Laetitia can exercise. Madam, in

the plainest language, without a possibility of my misapprehending him, Dr Middleton spoke of himself as the advocate of the suitor for my daughter's hand.

I have a poor head. I supposed at once an amicable rupture between Sir Willoughby and Miss Middleton, or that the version which had reached me of their engagement was not strictly accurate. My head is weak. Dr. Middleton's language is trying to a head like mine; but I can speak positively on the essential points: he spoke of himself as ready to be the impassioned advocate of the suitor for my daughter's hand. Those were his words. I understood him to entreat me to intercede with her. Nay, the name was mentioned. There was no concealment. I am certain there could not be a misapprehension. And my feelings were touched by his anxiety for Sir Willoughby's happiness. I attributed it to a sentiment upon which I need not dwell. Impassioned advocate, he said.'

'We are in a perfect maelstrom!' cried Lady Busshe, turning to everybody.

'It is a complete hurricane!' cried Lady Culmer.

A light broke over the faces of the Patterne ladies. They exchanged it with one another.

They had been so shocked as to be almost offended by Lady Busshe, but their natural gentleness and habitual submission rendered them unequal to the task of checking her.

'Is it not,' said Miss Eleanor, 'a misunderstanding that a change of names will rectify?'

'This is by no means the first occasion,' said Miss Isabel, 'that Willoughby has pleaded for his cousin Vernon.'

'We deplore extremely the painful error into which Mr Dale has fallen.'

'It springs, we now perceive, from an entire misapprehension of Dr Middleton.'

'Vernon was in his mind. It was clear to us.'

'Impossible that it could have been Willoughby!'

'You see the impossibility, the error!'

'And the Middletons here!' said Lady Busshe. 'Oh, if we leave unilluminated we shall be the laughing-stock of the county. Mr Dale, please, wake up. Do you see? You may have been mistaken.'

'Lady Busshe,' he woke up; 'I may have mistaken Dr Middleton; he has a language that I can compare only to a review-day of the field forces. But I have the story on authority that I cannot question: it is confirmed by my daughter's unexampled behaviour. And if I live through this day I shall look about me as a ghost to-morrow.'

'Dear Mr Dale!' said the Patterne ladies, compassionately.

Lady Busshe murmured to them: 'You know the two did not agree; they did not get on: I saw it; I predicted it.'

'She will understand him in time,' said they.

'Never. And my belief is, they have parted by consent, and Letty Dale wins the day at last. Yes, now I do believe it.'

The ladies maintained a decided negative, but they knew too much not to feel perplexed, and they betrayed it, though they said: 'Dear Lady Busshe! is it credible, in decency?'

'Dear Mrs Mountstuart!' Lady Busshe invoked her great rival appearing among them: 'You come most opportunely; we are in a state of inextricable confusion: we are bordering on frenzy. You, and none but you, can help us. You know, you always know; we hang on you. Is there any truth in it? a particle?'

Mrs Mountstuart seated herself regally. 'Ah, Mr Dale!' she said, inclining to him. 'Yes, dear Lady Busshe, there is a particle.'

'Now, do not roast us. You can; you have the art. I have the whole story. That is, I have a part. I mean, I have the outlines, I cannot be deceived, but you can fill them in, I know you can. I saw it yesterday. Now, tell us, tell us. It must be quite true or utterly false. Which is it?'

'Be precise.'

'His fatality! you called her. Yes, I was sceptical. But here we have it all come round again, and if the tale is true, I shall own you infallible. Has he? – and she?'

'Both.'

'And the Middletons here? They have not gone; they keep the field. And more astounding, she refuses him. And to add to it, Dr Middleton intercedes with Mr Dale for Sir Willoughby.'

'Dr. Middleton intercedes!' This was rather astonishing to Mrs Mountstuart.

'For Vernon,' Miss Eleanor emphasized.

'For Vernon Whitford, his cousin,' said Miss Isabel, still more emphatically.

‘Who,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, with a sovereign lift and turn of her head, ‘speaks of a refusal?’

‘I have it from Mr Dale,’ said Lady Busshe.

‘I had it, I thought, distinctly from Dr Middleton,’ said Mr Dale.

‘That Willoughby proposed to Laetitia for his cousin Vernon, Doctor Middleton meant,’ said Miss Eleanor.

Her sister followed: ‘Hence this really ridiculous misconception! – sad, indeed,’ she added, for balm to Mr Dale. ‘Willoughby was Vernon’s proxy. His cousin, if not his first, is ever the second thought with him.’

‘But can we continue…?

‘Such a discussion!’

Mrs Mountstuart gave them a judicial hearing. They were regarded in the county as the most indulgent of nonentities, and she as little as Lady Busshe was restrained from the burning topic in their presence. She pronounced:

‘Each party is right, and each is wrong.’

A dry: ‘I shall shriek!’ came from Lady Busshe.

‘Cruel!’ groaned Lady Culmer.

‘Mixed, you are all wrong. Disentangled, you are each of you right. Sir Willoughby does think of his cousin Vernon; he is anxious to establish him; he is the author of a proposal to that effect.’

‘We know it!’ the Patterne ladies exclaimed. ‘And Laetitia rejected poor Vernon once more!’

‘Who spoke of Miss Dale’s rejection of Mr Whitford?’

‘Is he not rejected?’ Lady Culmer inquired.

‘It is in debate, and at this moment being decided.’

‘Oh, do be seated, Mr Dale,’ Lady Busshe implored him, rising to thrust him back to his chair if necessary. ‘Any dislocation, and we are thrown out again! We must hold together if this riddle is ever to be read. Then, dear Mrs Mountstuart, we are to say that there is no truth in the other story?’

‘You are to say nothing of the sort, dear Lady Busshe.’

‘Be merciful! And what of the fatality?’

‘As positive as the Pole to the needle.’

‘She has not refused him?’

‘Ask your own sagacity.’

‘Accepted?’

‘Wait.’

‘And all the world’s ahead of me! Now, Mrs Mountstuart, you are oracle. Riddles, if you like, only speak. If we can’t have corn, why, give us husks.’

‘Is any one of us able to anticipate events, Lady Busshe?’

‘Yes, I believe that you are. I bow to you. I do sincerely. So it’s another person for Mr Whitford? You nod. And it is our Laetitia for Sir Willoughby? You smile. You would not deceive me? A very little, and I run about crazed and howl at your doors. And Dr Middleton is made to play blind man in the midst? And the other person is – now I see day! An amicable rupture, and a smooth new arrangement. She has money; she was never the match for our hero; never; I saw it yesterday, and before, often; and so he hands her over – tuthe-rum-tum-tum, tuthe-rum-tum-tum,’ Lady Busshe struck a quick march on her knee. ‘Now isn’t that clever guessing? The shadow of a clue for me. And because I know human nature. One peep, and I see the combination in a minute. So he keeps the money in the family, becomes a benefactor to his cousin by getting rid of the girl, and succumbs to his fatality. Rather a pity he let it ebb and flow so long. Time counts the tides, you know. But it improves the story. I defy any other county in the kingdom to produce one fresh and living to equal it. Let me tell you I suspected Mr Whitford, and I hinted it yesterday.’

‘Did you indeed!’ said Mrs Mountstuart, humouring her excessive acuteness.

‘I really did. There is that dear good man on his feet again. And looks agitated again.’

Mr Dale had been compelled both by the lady’s voice and his interest in the subject to listen. He had listened more than enough; he was exceedingly nervous. He held on by his chair, afraid to quit his moorings, and ‘Manners!’ he said to himself unconsciously aloud, as he cogitated on the libertine way with which these chartered great ladies of the district discussed his daughter. He was heard and unnoticed. The supposition, if any, would have been that he was admonishing himself.

At this juncture Sir Willoughby entered the drawing-room by the garden window, and simultaneously Dr Middleton by the door.

CHAPTER 46

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The Scene of Sir Willoughby's Generalship

HISTORY, we may fear, will never know the qualities of leadership inherent in Sir Willoughby Patterne to fit him for the post of Commander of an army, seeing that he avoided the fatigues of the service and preferred the honours bestowed in his country upon the quiet administrators of their own estates: but his possession of particular gifts, which are military, and especially of the proleptic mind, which is the stamp and sign-warrant of the heaven-sent General, was displayed on every urgent occasion when, in the midst of difficulties likely to have extinguished one less alert than he to the threatening aspect of disaster, he had to manoeuvre himself.

He had received no intimation of Mr Dale's presence in his house, nor of the arrival of the dreaded women Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer: his locked door was too great a terror to his domestics. Having finished with Vernon, after a tedious endeavour to bring the fellow to a sense of the policy of the step urged on him, he walked out on the lawn with the desire to behold the opening of an interview not promising to lead to much, and possibly to profit by its failure. Clara had been prepared, according to his directions, by Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, as Vernon had been prepared by him. His wishes, candidly and kindly expressed both to Vernon and Mrs Mountstuart, were, that since the girl appeared disinclined to make him a happy man, she would make one of his cousin. Intimating to Mrs Mountstuart that he would be happier without her, he alluded to the benefit of the girl's money to poor old Vernon, the general escape from a scandal if old Vernon could manage to catch her as she dropped, the harmonious

arrangement it would be for all parties. And only on the condition of her taking Vernon would he consent to give her up. This he said imperatively, adding that such was the meaning of the news she had received relating to Laetitia Dale. From what quarter had she received it? he asked. She shuffled in her reply, made a gesture to signify that it was in the air, universal, and fell upon the proposed arrangement. He would listen to none of Mrs Mountstuart's woman-of-the-world instances of the folly of pressing it upon a girl who had shown herself a girl of spirit. She foretold the failure. He would not be advised; he said: 'It is my scheme'; and perhaps the look of mad benevolence about it induced the lady to try whether there was a chance that it would hit the madness in our nature, and somehow succeed or lead to a pacification. Sir Willoughby condescended to arrange things thus for Clara's good; he would then proceed to realize his own. Such was the face he put upon it. We can wear what appearance we please before

the world until we are found out, nor is the world's praise knocking upon hollowness always hollow music; but Mrs Mountstuart's laudation of his kindness and simplicity disturbed him; for though he had recovered from his rebuff enough to imagine that Laetitia could not refuse him under reiterated pressure, he had let it be supposed that she was a submissive handmaiden throbbing for her elevation; and Mrs Mountstuart's belief in it afflicted his recent bitter experience; his footing was not perfectly secure. Besides, assuming it to be so, he considered the sort of prize he had won; and a spasm of downright hatred of a world for which we make mighty sacrifices to be repaid in a worn, thin, comparatively valueless coin, troubled his counting of his gains. Laetitia, it was true, had not passed through other hands in coming to him, as Vernon would know it to be Clara's case: time only had worn her: but the comfort of the reflection was annoyed by the physical contrast of the two. Hence an unusual melancholy in his tone that Mrs Mountstuart thought touching. It had the scenic effect on her which greatly contributes to delude the

wits. She talked of him to Clara as being a man who had revealed an unsuspected depth.

Vernon took the communication curiously. He seemed readier to be in love with his benevolent relative than with the lady. He was confused, undisguisedly moved, said the plan was impossible, out of the question, but thanked Willoughby for the best of intentions, thanked him warmly. After saying that the plan was impossible, the comical fellow allowed himself to be pushed forth on the lawn to see how Miss Middleton might have come out of her interview with Mrs Mountstuart. Willoughby observed Mrs Mountstuart meet him, usher him to the place she had quitted among the shrubs, and return to the open turf-spaces. He sprang to her.

'She will listen,' Mrs Mountstuart said: 'She likes him, respects him, thinks he is a very sincere friend, clever, a scholar, and a good mountaineer; and thinks you mean very kindly. So much I have impressed on her, but I have not done much for Mr Whitford.'

'She consents to listen,' said Willoughby, snatching at that as the death-blow to his friend Horace.

‘She consents to listen, because you have arranged it so that if she declined she would be rather a savage.’

‘You think it will have no result?’

‘None at all.’

‘Her listening will do.’

‘And you must be satisfied with it.’

‘We shall see.’

‘ “Anything for peace”, she says: and I don’t say that a gentleman with a tongue would not have a chance. She wishes to please you.’

‘Old Vernon has no tongue for women, poor fellow! You will have us be spider or fly, and if a man can’t spin a web all he can hope is not to be caught in one. She knows his history, too, and that won’t be in his favour. How did she look when you left them?’

‘Not so bright: like a bit of china that wants dusting. She looked a trifle *gauche*, it struck me; more like a country girl with the hoyden taming in her than the well-bred creature she is. I did not suspect her to have feeling. You must remember, Sir Willoughby, that she has obeyed your wishes, done her utmost: I do think we may say she has made some amends; and if she is to blame she repents, and you will not insist too far.’

‘I do insist,’ said he.

‘Beneficent, but a tyrant!’

‘Well, well.’ He did not dislike the character.

They perceived Dr Middleton wandering over the lawn, and Willoughby went to him to put him on the wrong track: Mrs Mountstuart swept into the drawing-room. Willoughby quitted the Rev. Doctor, and hung about the bower where he supposed his pair of dupes had by this time ceased to stutter mutually: – or what if they had found the word of harmony? He could bear that, just bear it. He rounded the shrubs, and, behold, both had vanished. The trellis decorated emptiness. His idea was, that they had soon discovered their inability to be turtles: and desiring not to lose a moment while Clara was fretted by the scene, he rushed to the drawing-room with the hope of lighting on her there, getting her to himself, and finally, urgently, passionately offering her the sole alternative of what she had immediately rejected. Why had he not used passion before, instead of limping crippled between temper and policy? He was capable of it: as soon as imagination in him conceived his personal feelings unwounded and unim-periled, the might of it inspired him with heroical confidence, and Clara grateful, Clara softly moved, led him to think of Clara melted. Thus anticipating her he burst into the room.

One step there warned him that he was in the jaws of the world. We have the phrase, that a man is himself under certain trying circumstances. There is no need to say it of Sir Willoughby: he was thrice himself when danger menaced, himself inspired him. He could read at a single glance the Polyphemus eye in the general head of a company. Lady Busshe, Lady Culmer, Mrs Mountstuart, Mr Dale, had a similarity in the variety of their expressions that made up one giant eye for him perfectly, if awfully, legible. He discerned the fact that his demon secret was abroad, universal. He ascribed it to fate. He was in the jaws of the world, on the world’s teeth. This time he thought Laetitia must have betrayed him, and bowing to Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, gallantly pressing their fingers and responding to their becks and archnesses, he ruminated on his defences before he should accost her father. He did not want to be alone with the man, and he considered how his presence might be made useful.

‘I am glad to see you, Mr Dale. Pray, be seated. Is it nature asserting her strength? or the efficacy of medicine? I fancy it can’t be both. You have brought us back your daughter?’

Mr Dale sank into a chair, unable to resist the hand forcing him.

‘No, Sir Willoughby, no. I have not; I have not seen her since she came home this morning from Patterne.’

‘Indeed? She is unwell?’

‘I cannot say. She secludes herself.’

‘Has locked herself in,’ said Lady Busshe.

Willoughby threw her a smile. It made them intimate.

This was an advantage against the world, but an exposure of himself to the abominable woman.

Dr Middleton came up to Mr Dale to apologize for not presenting his daughter Clara, whom he could find neither in nor out of the house.

‘We have in Mr Dale, as I suspected,’ he said to Willoughby, ‘a stout ally.’

‘If I may beg two minutes with you, Sir Willoughby,’ said Mr Dale.

‘Your visits are too rare for me to allow of your numbering the minutes,’ Willoughby replied. ‘We cannot

let Mr Dale escape us now that we have him, I think, Dr Middleton.'

'Not without ransom,' said the Rev. Doctor.

Mr Dale shook his head. 'My strength, Sir Willoughby, will not sustain me long.'

'You are at home, Mr Dale.'

'Not far from home, in truth, but too far for an invalid beginning to grow sensible of weakness.'

'You will regard Patterne as your home, Mr Dale,' Willoughby repeated for the world to hear.

'Unconditionally?' Dr Middleton inquired, with a humourous air of dissenting.

Willoughby gave him a look that was coldly courteous, and then he looked at Lady Busshe. She nodded imperceptibly. Her eyebrows rose, and Willoughby returned a similar nod.

Translated, the signs ran thus:

'– Pestered by the Rev. gentleman: – I see you are. Is the story I have heard correct? Possibly it may err in a few details.'

This was fettering himself in loose manacles.

But Lady Busshe would not be satisfied with the compliment of the intimate looks and nods. She thought she might still be behind Mrs Mountstuart; and she was a bold woman, and anxious about him, half-crazed by the riddle of the pot she was boiling in, and having very few minutes to spare.

Not extremely reticent by nature, privileged by station, and made intimate with him by his covert looks, she stood up to him. 'One word to an old friend. Which is the father of the fortunate creature? I don't know how to behave to them.'

No time was afforded him to be disgusted with her vulgarity and audacity.

He replied, feeling her rivet his gyves: 'The house will be empty to-morrow.'

'I see. A decent withdrawal, and very well cloaked. We had a tale here of her running off to decline the honour, afraid, or on her dignity or something.'

How was it that the woman was ready to accept the altered posture of affairs in his house – if she had received a hint of them? He forgot that he had prepared her in self-defence.

'From whom did you have that?' he asked.

'Her father. And the lady aunts declare it was the cousin she refused!'

Willoughby's brain turned over. He righted it for action, and crossed the room to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. His ears tingled. He and his whole story discussed in public! Himself unroofed! And the marvel that he of all men should be in such a tangle, naked and blown on, condemned to use his cunningest arts to unwind and cover himself, struck him as though the lord of his kind were running the gantlet of a legion of imps. He felt their lashes.

The ladies were talking to Mrs Mountstuart and Lady Culmer of Vernon and the suitableness of Laetitia to a scholar. He made sign to them, and both rose.

'It is the hour for your drive. To the cottage! Mr Dale is ill. She must come. Her sick father! No delay, going or returning. Bring her here at once.'

'Poor man!' they sighed; and 'Willoughby,' said one, and the other said: 'There is a strange misconception you will do well to correct.'

They were about to murmur what it was. He swept his hand round, and excusing themselves to their guests, obediently they retired.

Lady Busshe at his entreaty remained, and took a seat beside Lady Culmer and Mrs Mountstuart.

She said to the latter: 'You have tried scholars. What do you think?'

'Excellent, but hard to mix,' was the reply.

'I never make experiments,' said Lady Culmer.

'Some one must!' Mrs Mountstuart groaned over her dull dinner-party.

Lady Busshe consoled her. 'At any rate, the loss of a scholar is no loss to the county.'

'They are well enough in towns,' Lady Culmer said.

'And then I am sure you must have them by themselves.'

'We have nothing to regret.'

'My opinion.'

The voice of Dr Middleton in colloquy with Mr Dale swelled on a melodious thunder: 'For whom else should I plead as the passionate advocate I proclaimed myself to you, sir? There is but one man known to me who would move me to back him upon such an adventure. Willoughby, join me. I am informing Mr

Dale…'

Willoughby stretched his hands out to Mr Dale to support him on his legs, though he had shown no sign of a wish to rise.

'You are feeling unwell, Mr Dale.'

'Do I look very ill, Sir Willoughby?'

'It will pass. Laetitia will be with us in twenty minutes.'

Mr Dale struck his hands in a clasp. He looked alarmingly ill, and satisfactorily revealed to his host how he could be made to look so.

'I was informing Mr Dale that the petitioner enjoys our concurrent good wishes: and mine in no degree less than yours, Willoughby,' observed Dr Middleton, whose billows grew the bigger for a check. He supposed himself speaking confidentially. 'Ladies have the trick, they have, I may say, the natural disposition for playing enigma now and again. Pressure is often a sovereign specific. Let it be tried upon her all round from every radiating line of the circle. You she refuses. Then I venture to propose myself to appeal to her. My daughter has assuredly an esteem for the applicant that will animate a woman's tongue in such a case. The ladies of the house will not be backward. Lastly, if necessary, we trust the lady's father to add his instances. My prescription is, to fatigue her negatives; and where no rooted objection exists, I maintain it to be the unfailing receipt for the conduct of the siege. No woman can say No forever. The defence has not such resources against even a single assailant, and we shall have solved the problem of continuous motion before she will have learned to deny in perpetuity. That I stand on.'

Willoughby glanced at Mrs Mountstuart.

'What is that?' she said. 'Treason to our sex, Dr Middleton?'

'I think I heard that no woman can say No forever!' remarked Lady Busshe.

'To a loyal gentleman, ma'am: assuming the field of the recurring request to be not unholy ground; consecrated to affirmatives rather.'

Dr Middleton was attacked by three angry bees. They made him say yes and no alternately so many times that he had to admit in men a shiftier yieldingness than women were charged with.

Willoughby gesticulated, as mute chorus on the side of the ladies; and a little show of party spirit like that, coming upon their excitement under the topic, inclined them to him genially.

He drew Mr Dale away while the conflict subsided in sharp snaps of rifles and an interval rejoinder of a cannon.

Mr Dale had shown by signs that he was growing fretfully restive under his burden of doubt.

'Sir Willoughby, I have a question. I beg you to lead me where I may ask it. I know my head is weak.'

'Mr Dale, it is answered when I say that my house is your home, and that Laetitia will soon be with us.'

'Then this report is true?'

'I know nothing of reports. You are answered.'

'Can my daughter be accused of any shadow of falseness, dishonourable dealing?'

'As little as I.'

Mr Dale scanned his face. He saw no shadow.

'For I should go to my grave bankrupt if that could be said of her; and I have never yet felt poor, though you know the extent of a pensioner's income. Then this tale of a refusal…?'

'Is nonsense.'

'She has accepted?'

'There are situations, Mr Dale, too delicate to be clothed in positive definitions.'

'Ah, Sir Willoughby, but it becomes a father to see that his daughter is not forced into delicate situations. I hope all is well. I am confused. It may be my head. She puzzles me. You are not… Can I ask it here? You are quite…? Will you moderate my anxiety? My infirmities must excuse me.'

Sir Willoughby conveyed by a shake of the head and a pressure of Mr Dale's hand, that he was not, and that he was quite.

'Dr Middleton?' said Mr Dale.

'He leaves us to-morrow.'

'Really!' The invalid wore a look as if wine had been poured into him. He routed his host's calculations by calling to the Rev. Doctor. 'We are to lose you, sir?'

Willoughby attempted an interposition, but Dr Middleton crashed through it like the lordly organ swallowing a flute.

‘Not before I score my victory, Mr Dale, and establish my friend upon his rightful throne.’

‘You do not leave to-morrow, sir?’

‘Have you heard, sir, that I leave to-morrow?’

Mr Dale turned to Sir Willoughby.

The latter said: ‘Clara named to-day. To-morrow I thought preferable.’

‘Ah!’ Dr Middleton towered on the swelling exclamation, but with no dark light. He radiated splendidly. ‘Yes, then, to-morrow. That is, if we subdue the lady.’

He advanced to Willoughby, seized his hand, squeezed it, thanked him, praised him. He spoke under his breath, for a wonder; but: ‘We are in your debt lastingly, my friend’, was heard, and he was impressive, he seemed subdued, and saying aloud: ‘Though I should wish to aid in the reduction of that fortress’, he let it be seen that his mind was rid of a load.

Dr Middleton partly stupefied Willoughby by his way of taking it, but his conduct was too serviceable to allow of speculation on his readiness to break the match. It was the turning-point of the engagement.

Lady Busshe made a stir.

‘I cannot keep my horses waiting any longer,’ she said, and beckoned. Sir Willoughby was beside her immediately. ‘You are admirable! perfect! Don’t ask me to hold my tongue. I retract, I recant. It *is* a fatality. I have resolved upon that view. You could stand the shot of beauty, not of brains. That is our report. There! And it’s delicious to feel that the county wins you. No tea. I cannot possibly wait. And, oh! here she is. I must have a look at her. My dear Laetitia Dale!’

Willoughby hurried to Mr Dale!

‘You are not to be excited, sir: compose yourself. You will recover and be strong to-morrow: you are at home; you are in your own house; you are in Laetitia’s drawing-room. All will be clear to-morrow. Till to-morrow we talk riddles by consent. Sit, I beg. You stay with us.’

He met Laetitia and rescued her from Lady Busshe, murmuring, with the air of a lover who says, ‘my love! my sweet!’ that she had done rightly to come and come at once.

Her father had been thrown into the proper condition of clammy nervousness to create the impression. Laetitia’s anxiety sat prettily on her long eyelashes as she bent over him in his chair.

Hereupon Dr Corney appeared; and his name had a bracing effect on Mr Dale. ‘Corney has come to drive me to the cottage,’ he said. ‘I am ashamed of this public exhibition of myself my dear. Let us go. My head is a poor one.’

Dr Corney had been intercepted. He broke from Sir Willoughby with a dozen little nods of accurate understanding of him, even to beyond the mark of the communications. He touched his patient’s pulse lightly, briefly sighed with professional composure, and pronounced: ‘Rest. Must not be moved. No, no, nothing serious,’ he quieted Laetitia’s fears, ‘but rest, rest. A change of residence for a night will tone him. I will bring him a draught in the course of the evening. Yes, yes, I’ll fetch everything wanted from the cottage for you and for him. Repose on Corney’s forethought.’

‘You are sure, Dr Corney?’ said Laetitia, frightened on her father’s account and on her own.

‘Which aspect will be the best for Mr Dale’s bedroom?’ the hospitable ladies Eleanor and Isabel inquired.

‘South east, decidedly: let him have the morning sun: a warm air, a vigorous air, and a bright air, and the patient wakes and sings in his bed.’

Still doubtful whether she was in a trap, Laetitia whispered to her father of the privacy and comforts of his home.

He replied to her that he thought he would rather be in his own home.

Dr Corney positively pronounced No to it.

Laetitia breathed again of home, but with the sigh of one overborne.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel took the word from Willoughby, and said: ‘But you are at home, my dear. This is your home. Your father will be at least as well attended here as at the cottage.’

She raised her eyelids on them mournfully, and by chance diverted her look to Dr Middleton, quite by chance.

It spoke eloquently to the assembly of all that Willoughby desired to be imagined.

‘But there is Crossjay,’ she cried. ‘My cousin has gone, and the boy is left alone. I cannot have him left alone. If we, if, Dr Corney, you are sure it is unsafe for papa to be moved to-day, Crossjay must… he cannot be left.’

‘Bring him with you, Corney,’ said Sir Willoughby; and the little doctor heartily promised that he would,

in the event of his finding Crossjay at the cottage, which he thought a distant probability.

'He gave me his word he would not go out till my return,' said Laetitia.

'And if Crossjay gave you his word,' the accents of a new voice vibrated close by, 'be certain that he will not come back with Dr Corney unless he has authority in your handwriting.'

Clara Middleton stepped gently to Laetitia, and with a manner that was an embrace, as much as kissed her for what she was doing on behalf of Crossjay. She put her lips in a pouting form to simulate saying: 'Press it.'

'He is to come,' said Laetitia.

'Then write him his permit.'

There was a chatter about Crossjay and the sentinel true to his post that he could be, during which Laetitia distressfully scribbled a line for Dr Corney to deliver to him. Clara stood near. She had rebuked herself for want of reserve in the presence of Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, and she was guilty of a slightly excessive containment when she next addressed Laetitia. It was, like Laetitia's look at Dr Middleton, opportune: enough to make a man who watched as Willoughby did a fatalist for life: the shadow of a difference in her bearing toward Laetitia sufficed to impute acting either to her present coolness or her previous warmth. Better still, when Dr Middleton said: 'So we leave to-morrow, my dear, and I hope you have written to the Darletons', Clara flushed and beamed, and repressed her animation on a sudden, with one grave look, that might be thought regretful, to where Willoughby stood.

Chance works for us when we are good captains.

Willoughby's pride was high, though he knew himself to be keeping it up like a fearfully dexterous juggler, and for an empty reward: but he was in the toils of the world.

'Have you written? The post-bag leaves in half an hour,' he addressed her.

'We are expected, but I will write,' she replied: and her not having yet written counted in his favour.

She went to write the letter. Dr Corney had departed on his mission to fetch Crossjay and medicine. Lady Busshe was impatient to be gone. 'Corney,' she said to Lady Culmer, 'is a deadly gossip.'

'Inveterate,' was the answer.

'My poor horses!'

'Not the young pair of bays?'

'Luckily they are, my dear. And don't let me hear of dining to-night!'

Sir Willoughby was leading out Mr Dale to a quiet room, contiguous to the invalid gentleman's bedchamber. He resigned him to Laetitia in the hall, that he might have the pleasure of conducting the ladies to their carriage.

'As little agitation as possible. Corney will soon be back,' he said, bitterly admiring the graceful subservience of Laetitia's figure to her father's weight on her arm.

He had won a desperate battle, but what had he won? What had the world given him in return for his efforts to gain it? Just a shirt, it might be said: simple scanty clothing, no warmth. Lady Busshe was unbearable; she gabbled; she was ill-bred, permitted herself to speak of Dr Middleton as ineligible, no loss to the county. And Mrs Mountstuart was hardly much above her, with her inevitable stroke of caricature: – 'You see Doctor Middleton's pulpit scampering after him with legs!' Perhaps the Rev. Doctor did punish the world for his having forsaken his pulpit, and might be conceived as haunted by it at his heels, but Willoughby was in the mood to abhor comic images; he hated the perpetrators of them and the grinners. Contempt of this laughing empty world, for which he had performed a monstrous immolation, led him to associate Dr Middleton in his mind, and Clara too, with the desireable things he had sacrificed – a shape of youth and health; a sparkling companion; a face of innumerable charms; and his own veracity; his inner sense of his dignity; and his temper, and the limpid frankness of his air of scorn, that was to him a visage of candid happiness in the dim retrospect. Haply also he had sacrificed more: he looked scientifically into the future: he might have sacrificed a nameless more. And for what? he asked again. For the favourable looks and tongues of these women whose looks and tongues he detested!

'Dr Middleton says he is indebted to me: I am deeply in *his* debt,' he remarked.

'It is we who are in *your* debt for a lovely romance, my dear Sir Willoughby,' said Lady Busshe, incapable of taking a correction, so thoroughly had he imbued her with his fiction, or with the belief that she had a good story to circulate.

Away she drove, rattling her tongue to Lady Culmer.

'A hat and horn, and she would be in the old figure of a post-boy on a hue-and-cry sheet,' said Mrs Mountstuart.

Willoughby thanked the great lady for her services, and she complimented the polished gentleman on his noble self-possession. But she complained at the same time of being defrauded of her ‘charmer’, Colonel De Craye, since luncheon. An absence of warmth in her compliment caused Willoughby to shrink and think the wretched shirt he had got from the world no covering after all: a breath flapped it.

‘He comes to me to-morrow, I believe,’ she said, reflecting on her superior knowledge of facts in comparison with Lady Busshe, who would presently be hearing of something novel, and exclaiming: ‘So, *that* is why you patronized the colonel!’ And it was nothing of the sort, for Mrs Mountstuart could honestly say she was not the woman to make a business of her pleasure.

‘Horace is an enviable fellow,’ said Willoughby, wise in The Book which bids us ever for an assuagement to fancy our friend’s condition worse than our own, and recommends the deglutition of irony as the most balsamic for wounds in the whole moral pharmacopoeia.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied, with a marked accent of deliberation.

‘The colonel is to have you to himself to-morrow!’

‘I can’t be sure of what I shall have in the colonel!’

‘Your perpetual sparkler?’

Mrs Mountstuart set her head in motion. She left the matter silent.

‘I’ll come for him in the morning,’ she said, and her carriage whirled her off.

Either she had guessed it, or Clara had confided to her the treacherous passion of Horace De Craye.

However, the world was shut away from Patterne for the night.

CHAPTER 47

⌘⌘⌘⌘

Sir Willoughby and His Friend Horace De Craye

WILLOUGHBY shut himself up in his laboratory to brood awhile after the conflict. Sounding through himself, as it was habitual with him to do, for the plan most agreeable to his taste, he came on a strange discovery among the lower circles of that microcosm. He was no longer guided in his choice by liking and appetite: he had to put it on the edge of a sharp discrimination, and try it by his acutest judgement before it was acceptable to his heart: and knowing well the direction of his desire, he was nevertheless unable to run two strides on a wish. He had learned to read the world: his partial capacity for reading persons had fled. The mysteries of his own bosom were bare to him; but he could comprehend them only in their immediate relation to the world outside. This hateful world had caught him and transformed him to a machine. The discovery he made was, that in the gratification of the egoistic instinct we may so beset ourselves as to deal a slaughtering wound upon Self to whatsoever quarter we turn.

Surely there is nothing stranger in mortal experience. The man was confounded. At the game of Chess it is the dishonour of our adversary when we are stale-mated: but in life, combatting the world, such a winning of the game questions our sentiments.

Willoughby’s interpretation of his discovery was directed by pity: he had no other strong emotion left in him. He pitied himself, and he reached the conclusion that he suffered because he was active; he could not be quiescent. Had it not been for his devotion to his house and name, never would he have stood twice the victim of womankind. Had he been selfish, he would have been the happiest of men! He said it aloud. He schemed benevolently for his unborn young, and for the persons about him: hence he was in a position forbidding a step under pain of injury to his feelings. He was generous: otherwise would he not in scorn of soul, at the outset, straight off have pitched Clara Middleton to the wanton winds? He was faithful in his affection: Laetitia Dale was beneath his roof to prove it. Both these women were examples of his power of forgiveness, and now a tender word to Clara might fasten shame on him – such was her gratitude! And if he did not marry Laetitia, laughter would be devilish all around him –such was the world’s! Probably Vernon would not long be thankful for the chance which varied the monotony of his days. What of Horace? Willoughby stripped to enter the ring with Horace: he cast away disguise. That man had been the first to divide him in the all but equal slices of his egoistic from his amatory self: murder of his individuality was the crime of Horace De Craye. And further, suspicion fixed on Horace (he knew not how, except that The Book bids us be suspicious of those we hate) as the man who had betrayed his recent dealings with Laetitia.

Willoughby walked the thoroughfares of the house to meet Clara and make certain of her either for himself, or, if it must be, for Vernon, before he took another step with Laetitia Dale. Clara could reunite him, turn him once more into a whole and an animated man; and she might be willing. Her willingness to listen to Vernon promised it. 'A gentleman with a tongue would have a chance', Mrs Mountstuart had said. How much greater the chance of a lover! For he had not yet supplicated her: he had shown pride and temper. He could woo, he was a torrential wooer. And it would be glorious to swing round on Lady Busshe and the world, with Clara nestling under an arm, and protest astonishment at the erroneous and utterly unfounded anticipations of any other development. And it would righteously punish Laetitia.

Clara came downstairs, bearing her letter to Miss Darleton.

'*Must* it be posted?' Willoughby said, meeting her in the hall.

'They expect us any day, but it will be more comfortable for papa,' was her answer. She looked kindly in her new shyness.

She did not seem to think he had treated her contemptuously in flinging her to his cousin, which was odd!

'You have seen Vernon?'

'It was your wish.'

'You had a talk?'

'We conversed.'

'A long one?'

'We walked some distance.'

'Clara, I tried to make the best arrangement I could.'

'Your intention was generous.'

'He took no advantage of it?'

'It could not be treated seriously.'

'It was meant seriously.'

'There I see the generosity.'

Willoughby thought this encomium, and her consent to speak on the subject, and her scarcely embarrassed air and richness of tone in speaking, very strange: and strange was her taking him quite in earnest. Apparently she had no feminine sensation of the unwontedness and the absurdity of the matter!

'But, Clara, am I to understand that he did not speak out?'

'We are excellent friends.'

'To miss it, though his chance were the smallest!'

'You forget that it may not wear that appearance to him.'

'He spoke not one word of himself?'

'No.'

'Ah! the poor old fellow was taught to see it was hopeless – chilled. May I plead? Will you step into the laboratory for a minute? We are two sensible persons…'

'Pardon me, I must go to papa.'

'Vernon's personal history, perhaps…'

'I think it honourable to him.'

'Honourable! – 'hem!'

'By comparison.'

'Comparison with what?'

'With others.'

He drew up to relieve himself of a critical and condemnatory expiration of a certain length. This young lady knew too much. But how physically exquisite she was!

'Could you, Clara, could you promise me – I hold to it. I must have it, I know his shy tricks – promise me to give him ultimately another chance? Is the idea repulsive to you?'

'It is one not to be thought of.'

'It is not repulsive?'

'Nothing could be repulsive in Mr Whitford.'

'I have no wish to annoy you, Clara.'

'I feel bound to listen to you, Willoughby. Whatever I can do to please you, I will. It is my life-long duty.'

‘Could you, Clara, could you conceive it, could you simply conceive it – give him your hand?’

‘As a friend. Oh, yes.’

‘In marriage.’

She paused. She, so penetrative of him when he opposed her, was hoodwinked when he softened her feelings: for the heart, though the clearest, is not the most constant instructor of the head; the heart, unlike the often obtuser head, works for itself and not for the commonwealth.

‘You are so kind… I would do much…’ she said.

‘Would you accept him – marry him? He is poor.’

‘I am not ambitious of wealth.’

‘*Would* you marry him?’

‘Marriage is not in my thoughts.’

‘But could you marry him?’

Willoughby expected no. In his expectation of it he hung inflated.

She said these words: ‘I could engage to marry no one else.’

His amazement breathed without a syllable.

He flapped his arms, resembling for the moment those birds of enormous body which attempt a rise upon their wings and achieve a hop.

‘Would you engage it?’ he said, content to see himself stepped on as an insect if he could but feel the agony of his false friend Horace – their common pretensions to win her were now of that comparative size.

‘Oh, there can be no necessity. And an oath – no!’ said Clara, inwardly shivering at a recollection.

‘But you could?’

‘My wish is to please you.’

‘You could?’

‘I said so.’

It has been known to the patriotic mountaineer of a hoary pile of winters, with little life remaining in him, but that little on fire for his country, that by the brink of the precipice he has flung himself on a young and lusty invader, dedicating himself exultingly to death if only he may score a point for his country by extinguishing in his country’s enemy the stronger man. So likewise did Willoughby, in the blow that deprived him of hope, exult in the toppling over of Horace De Craye. They perished together, but which one sublimely relished the headlong descent? And Vernon taken by Clara would be Vernon simply tolerated. And Clara taken by Vernon would be Clara previously touched, smirched. Altogether he could enjoy his fall.

It was at least upon a comfortable bed, where his pride would be dressed daily and would never be disagreeably treated.

He was henceforth Laetitia’s own. The bell telling of Dr Corney’s return was a welcome sound to Willoughby, and he said good-humouredly: ‘Wait, Clara, you will see your hero Crossjay.’

Crossjay and Dr Corney tumbled into the hall. Willoughby caught Crossjay under the arms to give him a lift in the old fashion pleasing to Clara to see. The boy was heavy as lead.

‘I had work to hook him and worse to net him,’ said Dr Corney. ‘I had to make him believe he was to nurse every soul in the house, you among them, Miss Middleton.’

Willoughby pulled the boy aside.

Crossjay came back to Clara heavier in looks than his limbs had been. She dropped her letter in the hall-box, and took his hand to have a private hug of him. When they were alone, she said: ‘Crossjay, my dear, my dear! you look unhappy.’

‘Yes, and who wouldn’t be, and you’re not to marry Sir Willoughby!’ his voice threatened a cry. ‘I know you’re not, for Dr Corney says you are going to leave.’

‘Did you so very much wish it, Crossjay?’

‘I should have seen a lot of you, and I sha’n’t see you at all, and I’m sure if I’d known I wouldn’t have – And he has been and tipped me this.’

Crossjay opened his fist in which lay three gold pieces.

‘That was very kind of him,’ said Clara.

‘Yes, but how can I keep it?’

‘By handing it to Mr Whitford to keep for you.’

‘Yes, but, Miss Middleton, oughtn’t I to tell him? I mean Sir Willoughby.’

‘What?’

‘Why, that I’ – Crossjay got close to her – ‘why, that I, that I – you know what you used to say. I wouldn’t tell a lie, but oughtn’t I, without his asking… and this money! I don’t mind being turned out again.’

‘Consult Mr Whitford,’ said Clara.

‘I know what you think, though.’

‘Perhaps you had better not say anything at present, dear boy.’

‘But what am I to do with this money?’

Crossjay held the gold pieces out as things that had not yet mingled with his ideas of possession.

‘I listened, and I told of him,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t help listening, but I went and told; and I don’t like being here, and his money, and he not knowing what I did. Haven’t you heard? I’m certain I know what you think, and so do I, and I must take my luck. I’m always in mischief, getting into a mess or getting out of it. I don’t mind, I really don’t, Miss Middleton, I can sleep in a tree quite comfortably. If you’re not going to be here, I’d just as soon be anywhere. I must try to earn my living some day. And why not a cabin-boy? Sir Cloudesley Shovel[34] was no better. And I don’t mind his being wrecked at last, if you’re drowned an admiral. So I shall go and ask him to take his money back, and if he asks me I shall tell him, and there. You know what it is: I guessed that from what Dr Corney said. I’m sure I know you’re thinking what’s manly. Fancy me keeping his money, and you not marrying him! I wouldn’t mind driving a plough. I shouldn’t make a bad gamekeeper. Of course I love boats best, but you can’t have everything.’

‘Speak to Mr Whitford first,’ said Clara, too proud of the boy for growing as she had trained him, to advise a course of conduct opposed to his notions of manliness, though now that her battle was over she would gladly have acquiesced in little casuistic compromises for the sake of the general peace.

Some time later Vernon and Dr Corney were arguing upon the question. Corney was dead against the sentimental view of the morality of the case propounded by Vernon as coming from Miss Middleton and partly shared by him. ‘If it’s on the boy’s mind,’ Vernon said, ‘I can’t prohibit his going to Willoughby and making a clean breast of it, especially as it involves me, and sooner or later I should have to tell him myself.’

Dr Corney said no at all points. ‘Now hear me,’ he said, finally. ‘This is between ourselves, and no breach of confidence, which I’d not be guilty of for forty friends, though I’d give my hand from the wrist-joint for one – my left, that’s to say. Sir Willoughby puts me one or two searching interrogations on a point of interest to him, his house and name. Very well, and good night to that, and I wish Miss Dale had been

ten years younger, or had passed the ten with no heart-risings and sinkings wearing to the tissues of the frame and the moral fibre to boot. She’ll have a fairish health, with a little occasional doctoring; taking her rank and wealth in right earnest, and shying her pen back to Mother Goose. She’ll do. And, by the way, I think it’s to the credit of my sagacity that I fetched Mr Dale here fully primed, and roused the neighbourhood, which I did, and so fixed our gentleman, neat as a prodded eel on a pair of prongs – namely, the positive fact and the general knowledge of it. But, mark me, my friend. We understand one another at a nod. This boy, young Squire Crossjay, is a good stiff hearty kind of a Saxon boy, out of whom you may cut as gallant a fellow as ever wore epaulettes.

I like him, you like him, Miss Dale and Miss Middleton like him; and Sir Willoughby Patterne, of Patterne Hall and other places, won’t be indisposed to like him mightily in the event of the sun being seen to shine upon him with a particular determination to make him appear a prominent object, because a solitary, and a Patterne.’ Dr Corney lifted his chest and his finger: ‘Now mark me, and verbum sap: Crossjay must not offend Sir Willoughby. I say no more. Look ahead. Miracles happen, but it’s best to reckon that they won’t. Well, now, and Miss Dale. She’ll not be cruel.’

‘It appears as if she would,’ said Vernon, meditating on the cloudy sketch Dr Corney had drawn.

‘She can’t, my friend. Her position’s precarious; her father has little besides a pension. And her writing damages her health. She can’t. And she likes the baronet. Oh, it’s only a little fit of proud blood. She’s the woman for him. She’ll manage him – give him an idea he’s got a lot of ideas. It’d kill her father if she were obstinate. He talked to me, when I told him of the business, about his dream fulfilled, and if the dream turns to vapour, he’ll be another example that we hang more upon dreams than realities for nourishment, and medicine too. Last week I couldn’t have got him out of his house with all my art and science. Oh, she’ll come round. Her father prophesied this, and I’ll prophesy that. She’s fond of him.’

‘She was.’

‘She sees through him?’

‘Without quite doing justice to him now,’ said Vernon. ‘He can be generous – in his way.’

‘How?’ Corney inquired, and was informed that he should hear in time to come.

Meanwhile Colonel De Craye, after hovering over the park and about the cottage for the opportunity of pouncing on Miss Middleton alone, had returned crest-fallen for once, and plumped into Willoughby's hands.

'My dear Horace,' Willoughby said, 'I've been looking for you all the afternoon. The fact is – I fancy you'll think yourself lured down here on false pretences: but the truth is, I am not so much to blame as the world will suppose. In point of fact, to be brief, Miss Dale and I… I never consult other men how they would have acted. The fact of the matter is, Miss Middleton… I fancy you have partly guessed it.'

'Partly,' said De Craye.

'Well, she has a liking that way, and if it should turn out strong enough, it's the best arrangement I can think of.'

The lively play of the colonel's features fixed in a blank inquiry.

'One can back a good friend for making a good husband,' said Willoughby. 'I could not break with her in the present stage of affairs without seeing to that. And I can speak of her highly, though she and I have seen in time that we do not suit one another. My wife must have brains.'

'I have always thought it,' said Colonel De Craye, glistening, and looking hungry as a wolf through his wonderment.

'There will not be a word against her, you understand. You know my dislike of tattle and gossip. However, let it fall on me; my shoulders are broad. I have done my utmost to persuade her, and there seems a likelihood of her consenting. She tells me her wish is to please me, and this will please me.'

'Certainly. Who's the gentleman?'

'My best friend, I tell you. I could hardly have proposed another. Allow this business to go on smoothly just now.'

There was an uproar within the colonel to blind his wits, and Willoughby looked so friendly that it was possible to suppose the man of projects had mentioned his best friend to Miss Middleton.

And who was the best friend?

Not having accused himself of treachery, the quick-eyed colonel was duped.

'Have you his name handy, Willoughby?'

'That would be unfair to him at present, Horace – ask yourself – and to her. Things are in a ticklish posture at present. Don't be hasty.'

'Certainly. I don't ask. Initials'll do.'

'You have a remarkable aptitude for guessing, Horace, and this case offers you no tough problem – if ever you acknowledged toughness. I have a regard for her and for him – for both pretty equally; you know I have, and I should be thoroughly thankful to bring the matter about.'

'Lordly!' said De Craye.

'I don't see it. I call it sensible.'

'Oh, undoubtedly. The style, I mean. Tolerably antique?'

'Novel, I should say, and not the worse for that. We want plain practical dealings between men and women. Usually we go the wrong way to work. And I loathe sentimental rubbish.'

De Craye hummed an air. 'But the lady?' said he.

'I told you, there seems a likelihood of her consenting.'

Willoughby's fish gave a perceptible little leap now that he had been taught to exercise his aptitude for guessing.

'Without any of the customary preliminaries on the side of the gentleman?' he said.

'We must put him through his paces, friend Horace. He's a notorious blunderer with women; hasn't a word for them, never marked a conquest.'

De Craye crested his plumes under the agreeable banter. He presented a face humourously sceptical.

'The lady is positively not indisposed to give the poor fellow a hearing?'

'I have cause to think she is not,' said Willoughby, glad of acting the indifference to her which could talk of her inclinations.

'Cause?'

'Good cause.'

'Bless us!'

'As good as one can have with a woman.'

‘Ah!’

‘I assure you.’

‘Ah! Does it seem like her, though?’

‘Well, she wouldn’t engage herself to accept him.’

‘Well, that seems more like her.’

‘But she said she could engage to marry no one else.’

The colonel sprang up, crying: ‘Clara Middleton said it?’ He curbed himself. ‘That’s a bit of wonderful compliancy.’

‘She wishes to please me. We separate on those terms. And I wish her happiness. I’ve developed a heart lately and taken to think of others.’

‘Nothing better. You appear to make cock sure of the other party – our friend?’

‘You know him too well, Horace, to doubt his readiness.’

‘Do *you*, Willoughby?’

‘She has money and good looks. Yes, I can say I do.’

‘It wouldn’t be much of a man who’d want hard pulling to that lighted altar!’

‘And if he requires persuasion, you and I, Horace, might bring him to his senses.’

‘Kicking, ’twould be!’

‘I like to see everybody happy about me,’ said Willoughby, naming the hour as time to dress for dinner.

The sentiment he had delivered was De Craye’s excuse for grasping his hand and complimenting him; but the colonel betrayed himself by doing it with an extreme fervour almost tremulous.

‘When shall we hear more?’ he said.

‘Oh, probably to-morrow,’ said Willoughby. ‘Don’t be in such a hurry.’

‘I’m an infant asleep!’ the colonel replied, departing.

He resembled one, to Willoughby’s mind: or a traitor drugged.

‘There is a fellow I thought had some brains!’

Who are not fools to be set spinning if we choose to whip them with their vanity! It is the consolation of the great to watch them spin. But the pleasure is loftier, and may comfort our unmerited misfortune for a while, in making a false friend drunk.

Willoughby, among his many preoccupations, had the satisfaction of seeing the effect of drunkenness on Horace De Craye when the latter was in Clara’s presence. He could have laughed. Cut in keen epigram were the marginal notes added by him to that chapter of The Book which treats of friends and a woman; and had he not been profoundly preoccupied, troubled by recent intelligence communicated by the ladies, his aunts, he would have played the two together for the royal amusement afforded him by his friend Horace.

CHAPTER 48

The Lovers

THE hour was close upon eleven at night. Laetitia sat in the room adjoining her father’s bedchamber. Her elbow was on the table beside her chair, and two fingers pressed her temples. The state between thinking and feeling, when both are molten and flow by us, is one of our nature’s intermissions, coming after thought has quieted the fiery nerves, and can do no more. She seemed to be meditating. She was conscious only of a struggle past.

She answered a tap at the door, and raised her eyes on Clara.

Clara stepped softly. ‘Mr Dale is asleep?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Ah! dear friend.’

Laetitia let her hand be pressed.

‘Have you had a pleasant evening?’

‘Mr Whitford and papa have gone to the library.’

‘Colonel De Craye has been singing?’

‘Yes – with a voice! I thought of you upstairs, but could not ask him to sing piano.’

‘He is probably exhilarated.’

‘One would suppose it: he sang well.’

‘You are not aware of any reason?’

‘It cannot concern me.’

Clara was in rosy colour, but could meet a steady gaze.

‘And Crossjay has gone to bed?’

‘Long since. He was at dessert. He would not touch anything.’

‘He is a strange boy.’

‘Not very strange, Laetitia.’

‘He did not come to me to wish me good-night.’

‘That is not strange.’

‘It is his habit at the cottage and here; and he professes to like me.’

‘Oh, he does. I may have wakened his enthusiasm, but you he loves.’

‘Why do you say it is not strange, Clara?’

‘He fears you a little.’

‘And why should Crossjay fear me?’

‘Dear, I will tell you. Last night – You will forgive him, for it was by accident: his own bed-room door was locked and he ran down to the drawing-room and curled himself up on the ottoman, and fell asleep, under that padded silken coverlet of the ladies – boots and all, I am afraid!’

Laetitia profited by this absurd allusion, thanking Clara in her heart for the refuge.

‘He should have taken off his boots,’ she said.

‘He slept there, and woke up. Dear, he meant no harm. Next day he repeated what he had heard. You will blame him. He meant well in his poor boy’s head. And now it is over the county. Ah! do not frown.’

‘That explains Lady Busshe!’ exclaimed Laetitia.

‘Dear, dear friend,’ said Clara. ‘Why – I presume on your tenderness for me; but let me: to-morrow I go – why will you reject your happiness? Those kind good ladies are deeply troubled. They say your resolution is inflexible; you resist their entreaties and your father’s. Can it be that you have any doubt of the strength of this attachment? I have none. I have never had a doubt that it was the strongest of his feelings. If before I go I could see you… both happy, I should be relieved, I should rejoice.’

Laetitia said, quietly: ‘Do you remember a walk we had one day together to the cottage?’

Clara put up her hands with the motion of intending to stop her ears.

‘Before I go!’ said she. ‘If I might know this was to be, which all desire, before I leave, I should not feel as I do now. I long to see you happy… him, yes, him too. Is it like asking you to pay my debt? Then, please! But, no; I am not more than partly selfish on this occasion. He has won my gratitude. He can be really generous.’

‘An Egoist?’

‘Who is?’

‘You have forgotten our conversation on the day of our walk to the cottage?’

‘Help me to forget it – that day, and those days, and all those days! I should be glad to think I passed a time beneath the earth, and have risen again. I was the Egoist. I am sure, if I had been buried, I should not have stood up seeing myself more vilely stained, soiled, disfigured – oh! Help me to forget my conduct, Laetitia. He and I were unsuited – and I remember I blamed myself then. You and he are not: and now I can perceive the pride that can be felt in him. The worst that can be said is that he schemes too much.’

‘Is there any fresh scheme?’ said Laetitia.

The rose came over Clara’s face.

‘You have not heard? It was impossible, but it was kindly intended. Judging by my own feeling at this moment, I can understand his. We love to see our friends established.’

Laetitia bowed. ‘My curiosity is piqued, of course.’

‘Dear friend, to-morrow we shall be parted. I trust to be thought of by you as a little better in grain than I have appeared, and my reason for trusting it is that I know I have been always honest – a boorish young woman in my stupid mad impatience: but not insincere. It is no lofty ambition to desire to be remembered

in that character, but such is your Clara, she discovers. I will tell you. It is his wish… his wish that I should promise to give my hand to Mr Whitford. You see the kindness.'

Laetitia's eyes widened and fixed:

'You think it kindness?'

'The intention. He sent Mr Whitford to me, and I was taught to expect him.'

'Was that quite kind to Mr Whitford?'

'What an impression I must have made on you during that walk to the cottage, Laetitia! I do not wonder; I was in a fever.'

'You consented to listen?'

'I really did. It astonishes me now, but I thought I could not refuse.'

'My poor friend Vernon Whitford tried a love speech?'

'He? no: Oh! no.'

'You discouraged him?'

'I? No.'

'Gently, I mean.'

'No.'

'Surely you did not dream of trifling? He has a deep heart.'

'Has he?'

'You ask that: and you know something of him.'

'He did not expose it to me, dear; not even the surface of the mighty deep.'

Laetitia knitted her brows.

'No,' said Clara, 'not a coquette: she is not a coquette, I assure you.'

With a laugh, Laetitia replied: 'You have still the "dreadful power" you made me feel that day.'

'I wish I could use it to good purpose!'

'He did not speak?'

'Of Switzerland, Tyrol, the Iliad, Antigone.'

'That was all?'

'No, Political Economy. Our situation, you will own, was unexampled: or mine was. Are you interested in me?'

'I should be if I knew your sentiments.'

'I was grateful to Sir Willoughby: grieved for Mr Whitford.'

'Real grief?'

'Because the task imposed on him of showing me politely that he did not enter into his cousin's ideas was evidently very great, extremely burdensome.'

'You, so quick-eyed in some things, Clara!'

'He felt for me. I saw that in his avoidance of… And he was, as he always is, pleasant. We rambled over the park for I know not how long, though it did not seem long.'

'Never touching that subject?'

'Not ever neighbouring it, dear. A gentleman should esteem the girl he would ask… certain questions. I fancy he has a liking for me as a volatile friend.'

'If he had offered himself?'

'Despising me?'

'You can be childish, Clara. Probably you delight to tease. He had his time of it, and it is now my turn.'

'But he must despise me a little.'

'Are you blind?'

'Perhaps, dear, we both are, a little.'

The ladies looked deeper into one another.

'Will you answer me?' said Laetitia.

'Your if? If he had, it would have been an act of condescension.'

'You are too slippery.'

'Stay, dear Laetitia. He was considerate in forbearing to pain me.'

‘That is an answer. You allowed him to perceive that it would have pained you.’

‘Dearest, if I may convey to you what I was, in a simile for comparison: I think I was like a fisherman’s float on the water, perfectly still, and ready to go down at any instant, or up. So much for my behaviour.’

‘Similes have the merit of satisfying the finder of them, and cheating the hearer,’ said Laetitia. ‘You admit that your feelings would have been painful.’

‘I was a fisherman’s float: please admire my simile; any way you like, this way or that, or so quiet as to tempt the eyes to go to sleep. And suddenly I might have disappeared in the depths, or flown in the air. But no fish bit.’

‘Well, then, to follow you, supposing the fish or the fisherman, for I don’t know which is which… Oh, no, no: this is too serious for imagery. I am to understand that you thanked him at least for his reserve.’

‘Yes.’

‘Without the slightest encouragement to him to break it?’

‘A fisherman’s float, Laetitia!’

Baffled and sighing, Laetitia kept silence for a space.

The simile chafed her wits with a suspicion of a meaning hidden in it.

‘If he had spoken?’ she said.

‘He is too truthful a man.’

‘And the railings of men at pussy women who wind about and will not be brought to a mark, become intelligible to me.’

‘Then Laetitia, if he had spoken, if, and one could have imagined him sincere…’

‘So truthful a man?’

‘I am looking at myself. If! – why, then, I should have burnt to death with shame. Where have I read? – some story – of an inextinguishable spark. That would have been shot into my heart.’

‘Shame, Clara? You are free.’

‘As much as remains of me.’

‘I could imagine a certain shame, in such a position, where there was no feeling but pride.’

‘I could not imagine it where there was no feeling but pride.’

Laetitia mused. ‘And you dwell on the kindness of a proposition so extraordinary!’ Gaining some light, impatiently she cried: ‘Vernon loves you.’

‘Do not say it!’

‘I have seen it.’

‘I have never had a sign of it.’

‘There is the proof.’

‘When it might have been shown again and again!’

‘The greater proof!’

‘Why did he not speak when he was privileged? – strangely, but privileged.’

‘He feared.’

‘Me?’

‘Feared to wound you – and himself as well, possibly. Men may be pardoned for thinking of themselves in these cases.’

‘But why should he fear?’

‘That another was dearer to you?’

‘What cause had I given… Ah! see! He could fear that; suspect it! See his opinion of me! Can he care for such a girl? Abuse me, Laetitia. I should like a good round of abuse. I need purification by fire. What have I been in this house? I have a sense of whirling through it like a madwoman. And to be loved, after it all! – No! we must be hearing a tale of an antiquary prizing a battered relic of the battle-field that no one else would look at. To be loved, I see, is to feel our littleness, hollowness – feel shame. We come out in all our spots. Never to have given me one sign, when a lover would have been so tempted! Let me be incredulous, my own dear Laetitia. Because he is a man of honour, you would say! But are you unconscious of the torture you inflict? For if I am – you say it – loved by this gentleman, what an object it is he loves –that has gone clamouring about more immodestly than women will bear to hear of, and she herself to think of! Oh, I have seen my own heart. It is a frightful spectre. I have seen a weakness in me that would have carried me anywhere. And truly I shall be charitable to women – I have gained that. But loved! by Vernon Whitford!

The miserable little me to be taken up and loved after tearing myself to pieces! Have you been simply speculating? You have no positive knowledge of it! Why do you kiss me?'

'Why do you tremble and blush so?'

Clara looked at her as clearly as she could. She bowed her head. 'It makes my conduct worse!'

She received a tenderer kiss for that. It was her avowal, and it was understood: to know that she had loved or had been ready to love him, shadowed her in the retrospect.

'Ah! you read me through and through,' said Clara, sliding to her for a whole embrace.

'Then there never was cause for him to fear?' Laetitia whispered.

Clara slid her head more out of sight. 'Not that my heart… But I said I have seen it; and it is unworthy of him. And if, as I think now, I could have been so rash, so weak, wicked, unpardonable – such thoughts were in me! – then to hear him speak would make it necessary for me to uncover myself and tell him – incredible to you, yes! – that while… yes, Laetitia, all this is true: and thinking of him as the noblest of men, I could have welcomed any help to cut my knot. So there,' said Clara, issuing from her nest with winking eyelids, 'you see the pain I mentioned.'

'Why did you not explain it to me at once?'

'Dearest, I wanted a century to pass.'

'And you feel that it has passed?'

'Yes; in Purgatory – with an angel by me. My report of the place will be favourable. Good angel, I have yet to say something.'

'Say it, and expiate.'

'I think I did fancy once or twice, very dimly, and especially to-day… properly I ought not to have had any idea: but his coming to me, and his not doing as another would have done, seemed… A gentleman of real nobleness does not carry the common light for us to read him by. I wanted his voice; but silence, I think, did tell me more: if a nature like mine could only have had faith without hearing the rattle of a tongue.'

A knock at the door caused the ladies to exchange looks.

Laetitia rose as Vernon entered.

'I am just going to my father for a few minutes,' she said.

'And I have just come from yours,' Vernon said to Clara.

She observed a very threatening expression in him.

The sprite of contrariety mounted to her brain to indemnify her for her recent self-abasement. Seeing the bedroom door shut on Laetitia, she said: 'And of course papa has gone to bed'; implying, 'otherwise –'

'Yes, he has gone. He wished me well.'

'His formula of good-night would embrace that wish.'

'And failing, it will be good-night for good to me!'

Clara's breathing gave a little leap. 'We leave early to-morrow.'

'I know. I have an appointment at Bregenz for June.'

'So soon? With papa?'

'And from there we break into Tyrol, and round away to the right, Southward.'

'To the Italian Alps! And was it assumed that I should be of this expedition?'

'Your father speaks dubiously.'

'You have spoken of me, then?'

'I ventured to speak of you. I am not over-bold, as you know.'

Her lovely eyes troubled the lids to hide their softness.

'Papa should not think of my presence with him dubiously.'

'He leaves it to you to decide.'

'Yes, then: many times: all that can be uttered.'

'Do you consider what you are saying?'

'Mr Whitford, I shut my eyes and say Yes.'

'Beware. I give you one warning. If you shut your eyes –'

'Of course,' she flew from him, 'big mountains must be satisfied with my admiration at their feet.'

'That will do for a beginning.'

‘They speak encouragingly.’

‘One of them.’ Vernon’s breast heaved high.

‘To be at your feet makes a mountain of you?’ said she.

‘With the heart of a mouse if that satisfies me!’

‘You tower too high; you are inaccessible.’

‘I give you a second warning. You may be seized and lifted.’

‘Some one would stoop, then.’

‘To plant you like the flag on the conquered peak!’

‘You have indeed been talking to papa, Mr Whitford.’

Vernon changed his tone.

‘Shall I tell you what he said?’

‘I know his language so well.’

‘He said –’

‘But you have acted on it?’

‘Only partly. He said –’

‘You will teach me nothing.’

‘He said…’

‘Vernon, no! oh! not in this house!’

That supplication coupled with his name confessed the end to which her quick vision perceived she was being led, where she would succumb.

She revived the same shrinking in him from a breath of their great word yet: not here; somewhere in the shadow of the mountains.

But he was sure of her. And their hands might join. The two hands thought so, or did not think, behaved like innocents.

The spirit of Dr Middleton, as Clara felt, had been blown into Vernon, rewarding him for forthright outspeaking. Over their books, Vernon had abruptly shut up a volume and related the tale of the house. ‘Has this man a spice of religion in him?’ the Rev. Doctor asked midway. Vernon made out a fair general case for his cousin in that respect. ‘The complemental dot on his i of a commonly civilized human creature!’ said Dr Middleton, looking at his watch and finding it too late to leave the house before morning. The risky communication was to come. Vernon was proceeding with the narrative of Willoughby’s generous plan when Dr Middleton electrified him by calling out: ‘He whom of all men living I should desire my daughter to espouse!’ and Willoughby rose in the Rev. Doctor’s esteem: he praised that sensibly minded gentleman,

who could acquiesce in the turn of mood of a little maid, albeit Fortune had withheld from him a taste of the switch at school. The father of the little maid’s appreciation of her volatility was exhibited in his exhortation to Vernon to be off to her at once with his authority to finish her moods and assure him of peace in the morning. Vernon hesitated. Dr Middleton remarked upon being not so sure that it was not he who had done the mischief. Thereupon Vernon, to prove his honesty, made his own story bare. ‘Go to her,’ said Dr Middleton. Vernon proposed a meeting in Switzerland, to which Dr Middleton assented, adding: ‘Go to her’: and as he appeared a total stranger to the decorum of the situation, Vernon put his delicacy aside, and taking his heart up, obeyed. He too had pondered on Clara’s consent to meet him after

she knew of Willoughby’s terms, and her grave sweet manner during the ramble over the park. Her father’s breath had been blown into him; so now, with nothing but the faith lying in sensation to convince him of his happy fortune (and how unconvincing that may be until the mind has grasped and stamped it, we experience even then when we acknowledge that we are most blessed), he held her hand. And if it was hard for him, for both, but harder for the man, to restrain their particular word from a flight to heaven when the cage stood open and nature beckoned, he was practised in self-mastery, and she loved him the more.

Laetitia was a witness of their union of hands on her coming back to the room.

They promised to visit her very early in the morning, neither of them conceiving that they left her to a night of storm and tears.

She sat meditating on Clara’s present appreciation of Sir Willoughby’s generosity.

CHAPTER 49

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Laetitia and Sir Willoughby

WE cannot be abettors of the tribes of imps whose revelry is in the frailties of our poor human constitution. They have their place and their service, and so long as we continue to be what we are now, they will hang on to us, restlessly plucking at the garments which cover our nakedness, nor ever ceasing to twitch them and strain at them until they have fairly stripped us for one of their horrible Walpurgis nights: when the laughter heard is of a character to render laughter frightful to the ears of men throughout the remainder of their days. But if in these festival hours under the beams of Hecate they are uncontrollable by the Comic Muse, she will not flatter them with her presence during the course of their insane and impious hilarities, whereof a description would out-Brocken Brockens and make Graymalkin and Paddock too intimately our familiars.

It shall suffice to say that from hour to hour of the midnight to the grey-eyed morn, assisted at intervals by the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, and by Mr Dale awakened and re-awakened – hearing the vehemence of his petitioning outcry to soften her obduracy – Sir Willoughby pursued Laetitia with solicitations to espouse him, until the inveteracy of his wooing wore the aspect of the life-long love he raved of aroused to a state of mania. He appeared, he departed, he returned; and all the while his imps were about him and upon him, riding him, prompting, driving, inspiring him with outrageous pathos, an eloquence to move any one but the dead, which its object seemed to be in her torpid attention. He heard them, he talked to them, caressed them; he flung them off, and ran from them, and stood vanquished for them to mount him again and swarm on him. There are men thus imp-haunted. Men who, setting their minds upon an object, must have it, breed imps. They are noted for their singularities, as their converse with the invisible and amazing distractions, are called. Willoughby became aware of them that night. He said to himself, upon one of his dashes into solitude: I believed I am possessed! And if he did not actually believe it, but only suspected it, or framed speech to account for the transformation he had undergone into a desperately beseeching creature, having lost acquaintance with his habitual personality, the operations of an impish host had undoubtedly smitten his consciousness.

He had them in his brain: for while burning with an ardour for Laetitia, that incited him to frantic excesses of language and comportment, he was aware of shouts of the names of Lady Busshe and Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, the which, freezing him as they did, were directly the cause of his hurrying to a wilder extravagance and more headlong determination to subdue before break of day the woman he almost dreaded to behold by daylight, though he had now passionately persuaded himself of his love of her. He could not, he felt, stand in the daylight without her. She was his morning. She was, he raved, his predestinated wife. He cried, ‘Darling!’ both to her and to solitude. Every prescription of his ideal of demeanour as an example to his class and country, was abandoned by the enamoured gentleman. He had lost command of his countenance. He stooped so far as to kneel, and not gracefully. Nay, it is in the chronicles of the invisible host around him, that in a fit of supplication, upon a cry of ‘Laetitia!’ twice repeated, he whimpered.

Let so much suffice. And indeed not without reason do the multitudes of the servants of the Muse in this land of social policy avoid scenes of an inordinate wantonness, which detract from the dignity of our leaders and menace human nature with confusion. Sagacious are they who conduct the individual on broad lines, over familiar tracks, under well-known characteristics. What men will do, and amorously minded men will do, is less the question than what it is politic they should be shown to do.

The night wore through. Laetitia was bent, but had not yielded. She had been obliged to say – and how many times she could not bear to recollect: ‘I do not love you; I have no love to give’; and issuing from such a night to look again upon the face of day, she scarcely felt that she was alive.

The contest was renewed by her father with the singing of the birds. Mr Dale then produced the first serious impression she had received. He spoke of their circumstances, of his being taken from her and leaving her to poverty, in weak health; of the injury done to her health by writing for bread; and of the oppressive weight he would be relieved of by her consenting. He no longer implored her; he put the case on common ground.

And he wound up: ‘Pray do not be ruthless, my girl.’

The practical statement, and this adjuration incongruously to conclude it, harmonized with her disordered understanding, her loss of all sentiment, and her desire to be kind. She sighed to herself: ‘Happily, it is over!’

Her father was too weak to rise. He fell asleep. She was bound down to the house for hours; and she walked round her room, here at the door, there at the windows, thinking of Clara's remark of a century passing. She had not wished it, but a light had come on her to show her what she would have supposed a century could not have effected: she saw the impossible of overnight a possible thing: not desireable, yet possible, wearing the features of the possible. Happily, she had resisted too firmly to be again besought.

Those features of the possible once beheld allured the mind to reconsider them. Wealth gives us the power to do good on earth. Wealth enables us to see the world, the beautiful scenes of the earth. Laetitia had long thirsted both for a dowering money-bag at her girdle, and the wings to fly abroad over lands which had begun to seem fabulous in her starved imagination. Then, moreover, if her sentiment for this gentleman was gone, it was only a delusion gone; accurate sight and knowledge of him would not make a woman the less helpful mate. That was the mate he required: and he could be led. A sentimental attachment would have been serviceless to him. Not so the woman allied by a purely rational bond: and he wanted guiding. Happily, she had told him too much of her feeble health and her lovelessness to be reduced to submit to another attack.

She busied herself in her room, arranging for her departure, so that no minutes might be lost after her father had breakfasted and dressed.

Clara was her earliest visitor, and each asked the other whether she had slept, and took the answer from the face presented to her. The rings of Laetitia's eyes were very dark. Clara was her mirror, and she said: 'A singular object to be persecuted through a night for her hand! I know these two damp dead leaves I wear on my cheeks to remind me of midnight vigils. But you have slept well, Clara.'

'I have slept well, and yet I could say I have not slept at all, Laetitia. I was with you, dear, part in dream and part in thought: hoping to find you sensible before I go.'

'Sensible. That is the word for me.'

Laetitia briefly sketched the history of the night; and Clara said, with a manifest sincerity that testified of her gratitude to Sir Willoughby: 'Could you resist him, so earnest as he is?'

Laetitia saw the human nature, without sourness: and redlied, 'I hope, Clara, you will not begin with a large stock of sentiment, for there is nothing like it for making you hard, matter-of-fact, worldly, calculating.'

The next visitor was Vernon, exceedingly anxious for news of Mr Dale. Laetitia went into her father's room to obtain it for him. Returning, she found them both with sad visages, and she ventured, in alarm for them, to ask the cause.

'It's this,' Vernon said: 'Willoughby will everlastingly tease that boy to be loved by him. Perhaps, poor fellow, he had an excuse last night. Anyhow, he went into Crossjay's room this morning, woke him up and talked to him, and set the lad crying, and what with one thing and another Crossjay got a berry in his throat, as he calls it, and poured out everything he knew and all he had done. I needn't tell you the consequence. He has ruined himself here for good, so I must take him.'

Vernon glanced at Clara. 'You must indeed,' said she. 'He is my boy as well as yours. No chance of pardon?'

'It's not likely.'

'Laetitia!'

'What can I do?'

'Oh! what can you not do?'

'I do *not* know.'

'Teach him to forgive!'

Laetitia's brows were heavy and Clara forbore to torment her.

She would not descend to the family breakfast-table. Clara would fain have stayed to drink tea with her in her own room, but a last act of conformity was demanded of the liberated young lady. She promised to run up the moment breakfast was over. Not unnaturally, therefore, Laetitia supposed it to be she to whom she gave admission, half an hour later, with a glad cry of, 'Come in, dear.'

The knock had sounded like Clara's.

Sir Willoughby entered.

He stepped forward. He seized her hands. 'Dear!' he said. 'You cannot withdraw that. You call me dear. I am, I must be dear to you. The word is out, by accident or not, but, by heaven, I have it and I give it up to no one. And love me or not – marry me, and my love will bring it back to you. You have taught me I am not so strong. I must have you by my side. You have powers I did not credit you with.'

‘You are mistaken in me, Sir Willoughby,’ Laetitia said feebly, outworn as she was.

‘A woman who can resist me by declining to be my wife, through a whole night of entreaty, has the quality I need for my house, and I will batter at her ears for months, with as little rest as I had last night, before I surrender my chance of her. But I told you last night I want you within the twelve hours. I have staked my pride on it. By noon you are mine: you are introduced to Mrs Mountstuart as mine, as the lady of my life and house. And to the world! I shall not let you go.’

‘You will not detain me here, Sir Willoughby?’

‘I will detain you. I will use force and guile. I will spare nothing.’

He raved for a term, as he had done overnight.

On his growing rather breathless, Laetitia said: ‘You do not ask me for love?’

‘I do not. I pay you the higher compliment of asking for *you*, love or no love. My love shall be enough. Reward me or not. I am not used to be denied.’

‘But do you know what you ask for? Do you remember what I told you of myself? I am hard, materialistic; I have lost faith in romance, the skeleton is present with me all over life. And my health is not good. I crave for money. I should marry to be rich. I should not worship you. I should be a burden, barely a living one, irresponsive and cold. Conceive such a wife, Sir Willoughby!’

‘It will be you!’

She tried to recall how this would have sung in her ears long back. Her bosom rose and fell in absolute dejection. Her ammunition of arguments against him had been expended overnight.

‘You are so unforgiving,’ she said.

‘Is it I who am?’

‘You do not know me.’

‘But you are the woman of all the world who knows *me*, Laetitia.’

‘Can you think it better for you to be known?’

He was about to say other words: he checked them. ‘I believe I do not know myself. Anything you will, only give me your hand; give it; trust to me; you shall direct me. If I have faults, help me to obliterate them.’

‘Will you not expect me to regard them as the virtues of meaner men?’

‘You will be my wife!’

Laetitia broke from him, crying: ‘Your wife, your critic! Oh, I cannot think it possible. Send for the ladies. Let them hear me.’

‘They are at hand,’ said Willoughby, opening the door.

They were in one of the upper rooms anxiously on the watch.

‘Dear ladies,’ Laetitia said to them, as they entered. ‘I am going to wound you, and I grieve to do it: but rather now than later, if I am to be your housemate. He asks me for a hand that cannot carry a heart, because mine is dead. I repeat it. I used to think the heart a woman’s marriage portion for her husband. I see now that she may consent, and he accept her, without one. But it is right that you should know what I am when I consent. I was once a foolish, romantic girl; now I am a sickly woman, all illusions vanished. Privation has made me what an abounding fortune usually makes of others – I am an Egoist. I am not deceiving you. That is my real character. My girl’s view of him has entirely changed; and I am almost indifferent to the change. I can endeavour to respect him, I cannot venerate.’

‘Dear child!’ the ladies gently remonstrated.

Willoughby motioned to them.

‘If we are to live together, and I could very happily live with you,’ Laetitia continued to address them, ‘you must not be ignorant of me. And if you, as I imagine, worship him blindly, I do not know how we are to live together. And never shall you quit this house to make way for me. I have a hard detective eye. I see many faults.’

‘Have we not all of us faults, dear child?’

‘Not such as he has; though the excuses of a gentleman nurtured in idolatry may be pleaded. But he should know that they are seen, and seen by her he asks to be his wife, that no misunderstanding may exist, and while it is yet time he may consult his feelings. He worships himself.’

‘Willoughby?’

‘He is vindictive.’

‘Our Willoughby?’

‘That is not your opinion, ladies. It is firmly mine. Time has taught it me. So, if you and I are at such variance, how can we live together? It is an impossibility.’

They looked at Willoughby. He nodded imperiously.

‘We have never affirmed that our dear nephew is devoid of faults. If he is offended… And supposing he claims to be foremost, is it not his rightful claim, made good by much generosity? Reflect, dear Laetitia. We are your friends too.’

She could not chastise the kind ladies any further.

‘You have always been my good friends.’

‘And you have no other charge against him?’

Laetitia was milder in saying, ‘He is unpardoning.’

‘Name one instance, Laetitia.’

‘He has turned Crossjay out of his house, interdicting the poor boy ever to enter it again.’

‘Crossjay,’ said Willoughby, ‘was guilty of a piece of infamous treachery.’

‘Which is the cause of your persecuting me to become your wife!’

There was a cry of ‘Persecuting!’

‘No young fellow behaving so basely can come to good,’ said Willoughby, stained about the face with flecks of redness at the lashings he received.

‘Honestly,’ she retorted. ‘He told of himself: and he must have anticipated the punishment he would meet. He should have been studying with a master for his profession. He has been kept here in comparative idleness to be alternately petted and discarded: no one but Vernon Whitford, a poor gentleman doomed to struggle for a livelihood by literature – I know something of that struggle – too much for me! – no one but Mr Whitford for his friend.’

‘Crossjay is forgiven,’ said Willoughby.

‘You promise me that?’

‘He shall be packed off to a crammer at once.’

‘But my home must be Crossjay’s home.’

‘You are mistress of my house, Laetitia.’

She hesitated. Her eyelashes grew moist. ‘You can be generous.’

‘He is, dear child!’ the ladies cried. ‘He is. Forget his errors, in his generosity, as we do.’

‘There is that wretched man Flitch.’

‘That sot has gone about the county for years to get me a bad character,’ said Willoughby.

‘It would have been generous in you to have offered him another chance. He has children.’

‘Nine. And I am responsible for them?’

‘I speak of being generous.’

‘Dictate.’ Willoughby spread out his arms.

‘Surely now you should be satisfied, Laetitia?’ said the ladies.

‘Is *he*?’

Willoughby perceived Mrs Mountstuart’s carriage coming down the avenue.

‘To the full.’ He presented his hand.

She raised hers with the fingers catching back before she ceased to speak and dropped it: –

‘Ladies. You are witnesses that there is no concealment, there has been no reserve, on my part. May Heaven grant me kinder eyes than I have now. I would not have you change your opinion of him; only that you should see how I read him. For the rest, I vow to do my duty by him. Whatever is of worth in me is at his service. I am very tired. I feel I must yield or break. This is his wish, and I submit.’

‘And I salute my wife,’ said Willoughby, making her hand his own, and warming to his possession as he performed the act.

Mrs Mountstuart’s indecent hurry to be at the Hall before the departure of Dr Middleton and his daughter, afflicted him with visions of the physical contrast which would be sharply perceptible to her this morning of his Laetitia beside Clara.

But he had the lady with brains! He had: and he was to learn the nature of that possession in the woman who is our wife.

CHAPTER 50

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Upon Which the Curtain Falls

'PLAIN sense upon the marriage question is my demand upon man and woman, for the stopping of many a tragedy.'

These were Dr Middleton's words in reply to Willoughby's brief explanation.

He did not say that he had shown it parentally while the tragedy was threatening, or at least there was danger of a precipitate descent from the levels of comedy. The parents of hymeneal men and women he was indisposed to consider as dramatis personae. Nor did he mention certain sympathetic regrets he entertained in contemplation of the health of Mr Dale, for whom, poor gentleman, the proffer of a bottle of the Patterne Port would be an egregious mockery. He paced about, anxious for his departure, and seeming better pleased with the society of Colonel De Craye than with that of any of the others. Colonel De Craye assiduously courted him, was anecdotal, deferential, charmingly vivacious, the very man the Rev. Doctor liked for company when plunged in the bustle of the preliminaries to a journey.

'You would be a cheerful travelling comrade, sir,' he remarked, and spoke of his doom to lead his daughter over the Alps and Alpine lakes for the Summer months.

Strange to tell, the Alps, for the Summer months, was a settled project of the colonel's.

And thence Dr. Middleton was to be hauled along to the habitable quarters of North Italy in high Summer-tide.

That also had been traced for a route on the map of Colonel De Craye.

'We are started in June, I am informed,' said Dr Middleton.

June, by miracle, was the month the colonel had fixed upon.

'I trust we shall meet, sir,' said he.

'I would gladly reckon it in my catalogue of pleasures,' the Rev. Doctor responded; 'for in good sooth it is conjecturable that I shall be left very much alone.'

'Paris, Strasburg, Basle?' the colonel inquired.

'The Lake of Constance, I am told,' said Dr Middleton.

Colonel De Craye spied eagerly for an opportunity of exchanging a pair of syllables with the third and fairest party of this glorious expedition to come.

Willoughby met him, and rewarded the colonel's frankness in stating that he was on the lookout for Miss Middleton to take his leave of her, by furnishing him the occasion. He conducted his friend Horace to the Blue Room, where Clara and Laetitia were seated circling a half embrace with a brook of chatter, and contrived an excuse for leading Laetitia forth. Some minutes later Mrs Mountstuart called aloud for the colonel, to drive him away. Willoughby, whose good offices were unabated by the services he performed to each in rotation, ushered her into the Blue Room, hearing her say, as she stood at the entrance: 'Is the man coming to spend a day with me with a face like that?'

She was met and detained by Clara.

De Craye came out.

'What are you thinking of?' said Willoughby.

'I was thinking,' said the colonel, 'of developing a heart, like you, and taking to think of others.'

'At last!'

'Ay, you're a true friend, Willoughby, a true friend. And a cousin to boot!'

'What! has Clara been communicative?'

'The itinerary of a voyage Miss Middleton is going to make.'

'Do you join them?'

'Why, it would be delightful, Willoughby, but it happens I've got a lot of powder I want to let off, and so I've an idea of shouldering my gun along the sea-coast and shooting gulls: which'll be a harmless form of committing patricide and matricide and fratricide – for there's my family, and I come of it! – the gull! And I've to talk lively to Mrs Mountstuart for something like a matter of twelve hours, calculating that she goes to bed at midnight: and I wouldn't bet on it; such is the energy of ladies of that age!'

Willoughby scorned the man who could not conceal a blow, even though he joked over his discomfiture.

‘Gull!’ he muttered.

‘A bird that’s easy to be had, and better for stuffing than for eating,’ said De Craye. ‘You’ll miss your cousin.’

‘I have,’ replied Willoughby, ‘one fully equal to supplying his place.’

There was confusion in the hall for a time, and an assembly of the household to witness the departure of Dr Middleton and his daughter. Vernon had been driven off by Dr Corney, who further recommended rest for Mr Dale, and promised to keep an eye for Crossjay along the road.

‘I think you will find him at the station, and if you do, command him to come straight back here,’ Laetitia said to Clara.

The answer was an affectionate squeeze, and Clara’s hand was extended to Willoughby, who bowed over it with perfect courtesy, bidding her adieu.

So the knot was cut. And the next carriage to Dr Middleton’s was Mrs Mountstuart’s, conveying the great lady and Colonel De Craye.

‘I beg you not to wear that face with me,’ she said to him. ‘I have had to dissemble, which I hate, and I have quite enough to endure, and I must be amused, or I shall run away from you and enlist that little countryman of yours, and him I can count on to be professionally restorative. Who can fathom the heart of a girl! Here is Lady Busshe right once more! And I was wrong. She must be a gambler by nature. I never should have risked such a guess as that. Colonel De Craye, you lengthen your face preternaturally, you distort it purposely.’

‘Ma’am,’ returned De Craye, ‘the boast of our army is never to know when we are beaten, and that tells of a greathearted soldiery. But there’s a field where the Briton must own his defeat, whether smiling or crying, and I’m not so sure that a short howl doesn’t do him honour.’

‘She was, I am certain, in love with Vernon Whitford all along, Colonel De Craye!’

‘Ah!’ the colonel drank it in. ‘I have learnt that it was not the gentleman in whom I am chiefly interested. So it was not so hard for the lady to vow to friend Willoughby she would marry no one else?’

‘Girls are unfathomable! And Lady Busshe – I know she did not go by character – shot one of her random guesses, and she triumphs. We shall never hear the last of it. And I had all the opportunities. I’m bound to confess I had.’

‘Did you by chance, ma’am,’ De Craye said, with a twinkle, ‘drop a hint to Willoughby ofher turn for Vernon Whitford?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Mountstuart, ‘I’m not a mischief-maker; and the policy of the county is to keep him in love with himself, or Patterne will be likely to be as dull as it was without a lady enthroned. When his pride is at ease he is a prince. I can read men. Now, Colonel De Craye, pray, be lively.’

‘I should have been livelier, I’m afraid, if you had dropped a bit of a hint to Willoughby. But you’re the magnanimous person, ma’am, and revenge for a stroke in the game of love shows us unworthy to win.’

Mrs Mountstuart menaced him with her parasol. ‘I forbid sentiments, Colonel De Craye. They are always followed by sighs.’

‘Grant me five minutes of inward retirement, and I’ll come out formed for your commands, ma’am,’ said he.

Before the termination of that space De Craye was enchanting Mrs Mountstuart, and she in consequence was restored to her natural wit.

So, and much so universally, the world of his dread and his unconscious worship wagged over Sir Willoughby Patterne and his change of brides, until the preparations for the festivities of the marriage flushed him in his county’s eyes to something of the splendid glow he had worn on the great day of his majority. That was upon the season when two lovers met between the Swiss and Tyrol Alps over the Lake of Constance. Sitting beside them the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly. But taking a glance at the others of her late company of actors, she compresses her lips.

Notes

1. (p. 43). *fresh from a Louis IV perruquier*: Though the phrase appears thus in all the

editions authorized by Meredith, it seems clear that he means a 'Louis XIV perruquier'.

2. (p. 53). *the devotee of Juggernaut*. Here Meredith appears to be confusing Indian customs and, if we relate this to the later reference in the same paragraph to *a woman to be burned*, to be assuming that the rite of sati or suttee, the self-immolation of widows, was in some way connected with the worship of the deity Jagganath in his temple of Puri. There was no such connexion.

3. (p. 59). *lash terga cauda*: Lash his tail from side to side.

4. (p. 67). *her of Ephesus*: A reference to the celebrated tale told by Petronius, in the *Satyricon*, of the newly widowed Ephesian lady who was consoled by a sentry ordered to guard the crucified bodies of three criminals; during his amatory absence from duty, one of the bodies was taken away, and the widow obligingly gave the corpse of her husband to hang in its place and so save her lover from punishment.

5. (p. 81). *retro Sathanas*: Get thee behind me, Satan.

6. (p. 87). *father-in-law*: Stepfather; this usage continued throughout the nineteenth century, and in some districts survives colloquially.

7. (p. 105). *the glorious Valentine's day of our naval annals*: 14 February 1797, when Sir John Jarvis, in his flagship the *Captain*, defeated the Spanish fleet at the Battle of Cape St Vincent.

8. (p. 109). *Flibbertigibbet*: An attendant fiend.

9. (p. 110). *Papa would quote the 'mulier formosa'*: The reference is to the opening passage of the *Ars Poetica*, where Horace talks of 'a woman, beautiful to the waist, ending in the black tail of an ugly fish'.

10. (p. 116). *Busby*: Dr Richard Busby, a seventeenth-century headmaster of Westminster School and a notorious flogger.
11. (p. 124). *the wise king*: Solomon who, when two women disputed the parenthood of a child, proposed to cut the infant in two, whereupon the real mother revealed herself by pleading for its life at the risk of losing it.
12. (p. 135). *a French philosopher*: Auguste Comte, the nineteenth-century founder of the philosophy of Positivism; Sir Willoughby is parodying his suggestion that the birthdays of benefactors of the human race (not necessarily French men of letters) should be celebrated in the calendar of his new humanitarian religion. At this time Meredith was closely associated with the English Positivists, including Frederic Harrison and especially Leslie Stephen, who gave some of his characteristics to the shaping of Vernon Whitford.
13. (p. 156). *Melusine*: A fairy or water-nymph of French legend, in nature half-woman and half-fish. She married Count Raymond de Poitiers who built Lusignan Castle for her; her condition was that Raymond should never visit her on a Saturday, but he broke his promise, Melusine turned into a serpent, and ever since that day her eerie cries are supposed to prelude the deaths of the lords of Lusignan.
14. (p. 225). *quid femina possit*: What a woman can do. From Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book V: 'Knowledge of what a woman can do in the madness of dishonoured love aroused uneasy forebodings in the Trojans' hearts.'
15. (p. 226). *'this the seat, this mournful gloom for that celestial light': Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 242–5, which Dr Middleton somewhat condenses. The full version runs:

> 'Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,'
> Said then the lost Archangel, 'this the seat
> That we must change for Heaven? this mournful gloom
> For that celestial light?…'

16. (p. 229). '*Factum est; laetus est; amantium irae, etc.*': 'It is done; he is happy; the quarrelling of lovers, etc.' The quotation from Terence which Dr Middleton leaves uncompleted continues 'amoris integratio est' – 'is the renewal of love', and it is this unsaid passage that of course gives point to his remark.
17. (p. 237). *nugae*: Trifling jests.
18. (p. 239). *the Idaean Three*: The goddesses Aphrodite, Hera and Athene, who on Mount Ida submitted to the judgement of the mortal Paris as to who was the most beautiful and hence worthy to receive at his hands the golden apple.
19. (p. 239). Graiis… *praeter, laudem nullius avaris*: Horace, in the Ars Poetica, tells us that 'The Greeks… coveted nothing beyond renown.' It is appropriate to Dr Middleton's ensuing remarks that Horace goes on to suggest the relative unworthiness of the Romans with their 'slavish love of money'.

20. (p. 244). '*Ut flos in septis secretus nascitur hortis… Sic virgo, dum…*': From Song LXII of the *Carmina* of Catullus: 'Like a flower springing secretly in an enclosed garden… So a virgin…' The whole passage, of which Meredith allows Dr Middleton to murmur five lines unreproduced, likens the Virgin to the flower protected and unplucked, and the last line, which the Doctor never completes, clearly mirrors his preoccupations at this time. 'Sic virgo, dum intacta manet, dum cara suis est…' 'So a virgin, while she is whole, while she is the darling of her kinsfolk…'
21. (p. 253). *modus agri non ita magnus*: A piece of land, not very large. (Horace, *Satires*, II.vi.1.)
22. (p. 253). *Quae virtus et quanta sit rivere parvo*: How virtuous and how greatly so it is to live on little. (Horace, *Satires*, II.ii.1.)
23. (p. 284). *Lesbia Quadrantaria*: Lesbia was the name under which Catullus wrote his love poems to the profligate Clodia, a Roman lady whom Cicero called Quadrantaria, meaning roughly 'worth a farthing'; she is said to have sold herself for a quarter of the then much-debased Roman copper coin, the *as*.
24. (p. 292). *bile tumet jecur*. [My] liver swells with bile. (Horace, *Odes*, 1.xiii.4.)
25. (p. 295). καὶ τρισκακοδαίμων: Triply unfortunate.
26. (p. 361). *Celtiberian Egnatius*: Catullus dedicates one of his Songs to the baiting of the Roman Egnatius. 'Egnatius, who has dazzlingly white teeth,' begins the poem, 'grins always and everywhere'. Lines 6 and 7, quoted by Dr Middleton, tell us that 'whatever happens, no matter where, no matter what he is doing, he always grins'. The Celtiberians were a native Spanish people with whom the Romans were often in conflict, and Catullus tells in vivid detail, which Meredith dared not reproduce for his Victorian readers, how they had white teeth and bright pink gums because each morning they vigorously scrubbed their teeth with their own urine.
27. (p. 366). *the Stagyrite*: Aristotle.
28. (p. 370). *Fridolin*: Countess Cunigond's page in Schiller's *Der Gang nach der Eisenhammer;* unjustly accused of making love to her, he incurs the enmity of the count, who orders that he be thrown into the furnace in a foundry, but, by a lucky chain of circumstance, his accuser is burnt instead.
29. (p. 467). *si brachia forte remisit*: If he has by chance relaxed his arms. *in pejus*: For the worse. The two fragments come from a passage in Virgil's *Georgics* (Book 1, lines 199–203), which run as follows:

    Sic omnia fatis
    In peius ruere ac retro sublapsa referri
    Non aliter quam qui adverso vix flumine lembum
    Remigiis subigit, si bracchia forte remisit,
    Atque illum in praeceps prono rapit alveus amni.

    Dr Middleton roughly paraphrases the last three lines.
30. (p. 487). *Jam ver egelidos renfert repores. The equinoctial fury departs*: These are the first lines of the song in which Catullus celebrates his departure from Bithynia (*Carmina*, xlvi)

    Iam ver egelidos renfert repores,
    Iam caeli furor aequinoctialis
    Iocundis Zephyri silescit aureis.

    'Now the spring brings back to us its mild airs, now the equinoctial fury of the heavens is calmed by the happy Zephyrs.'
31. (p. 495). *Lady Vauban*: The Seigneur de Vauban was the military engineer to Louis XIV, and one of the great fortification builders of all time; many of his works still stand in France.
32. (p. 518). *plangulcula*: The wax effigy used by a sorcerer.
33. (p. 518). *Optume*: Excellent. *ad rem*: To the point. *Firmavit fidem*: He has plighted his troth.
34. (p. 572). *Sir Cloudesley Shovel*: Sir Clowdesley Shovell (1650–1707) was long held up as one of the rare examples of high naval officers rising up from the ranks. A shoemaker's apprentice, he ran away to sea, took part in many of the great naval battles of the 1690s, assisted in the storming of Gibraltar in 1704, and in 1707 died when his ship foundered and sank with all hands off the Scilly Isles.

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GEORGE MEREDITH

El Egoísta

Una comedia narrativa

Edición de Antonio Lastra

CATEDRA
LETRAS UNIVERSALES

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Traducción de Antonio Lastra

CÁTEDRA

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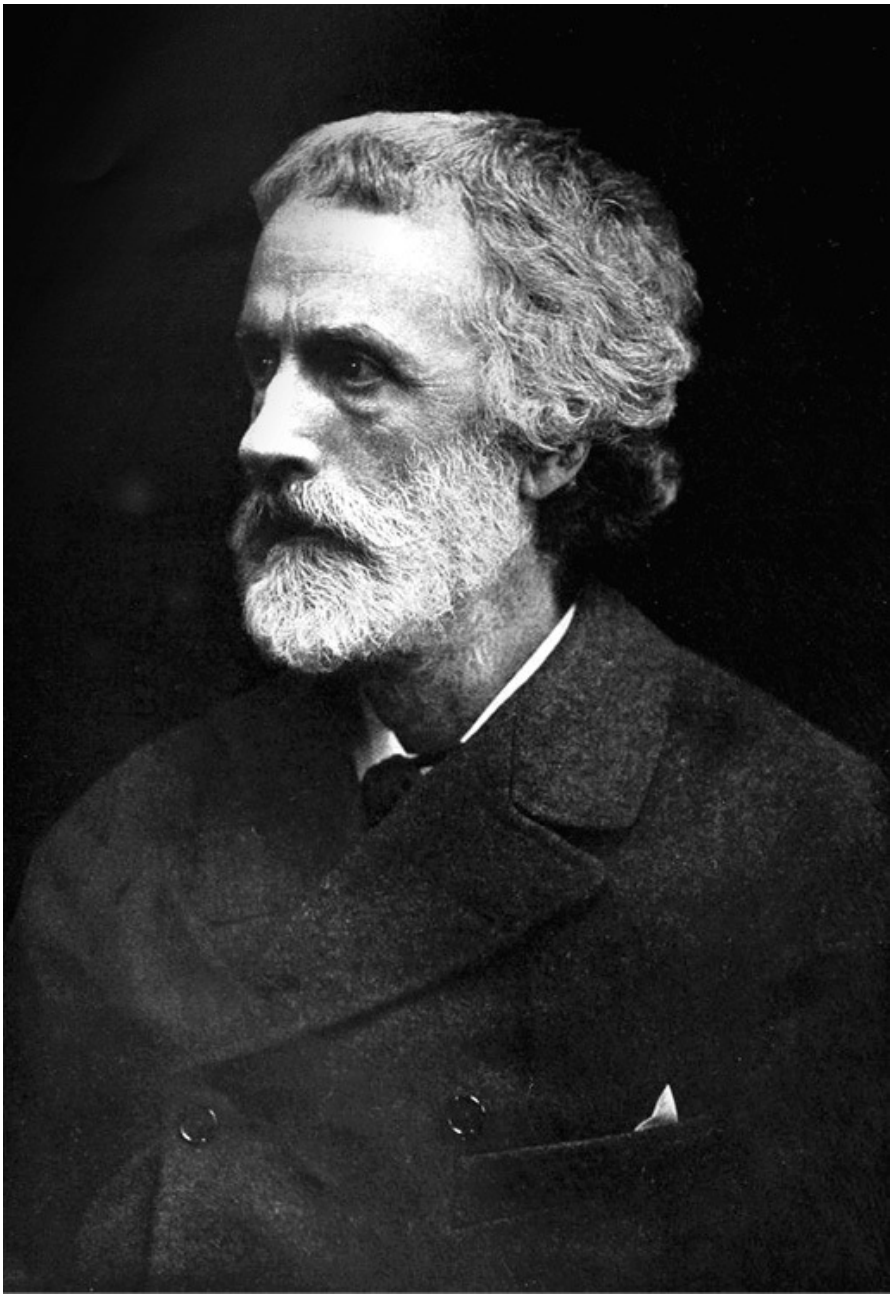
CRÉDITOS

INTRODUCCIÓN

My dear Stevenson, —I have had but the song of a frog for a correspondent since your letter reached me, and my note is Batrachian still. [...] My *Egoist* has been out of my hands for a couple of months, but Kegan Paul does not wish to publish it before October. I don't think you will like it: I doubt if those who care for my work will take to it at all. And for this reason, after doing my best with it, I am in no hurry to see it appear. It is a Comedy, with only half of me in it, unlikely to take either the public or my friends. This is true truth, but I warned you that I am cursed with a croak.

[Mi querido Stevenson: no he tenido otro corresponsal que una rana desde que me llegó su carta y mi nota sigue siendo batracia. [...] Hace un par de meses que solté mi *Egoísta,* pero Kegan Paul no quiere publicarlo antes de octubre. No creo que a usted le guste: dudo que la acepten incluso quienes se preocupan por mi obra. Por esa razón, después de haber hecho todo cuanto he podido, no tengo prisa por verla aparecer. Es una Comedia, que solo contiene la mitad de mí mismo, y no es probable que la acepten ni el público ni mis amigos. Esa es la auténtica verdad, pero le advierto que la maldición del croar me persigue.]

George Meredith a Robert Louis Stevenson,
16 de abril de 1879



George Meredith

DURANTE las dos décadas inmediatamente anteriores a la publicación por entregas de *Sir Willoughby Patterne the Egoist* de George Meredith en el *Glasgow Weekly Herald,* entre junio de 1879 y enero de 1880, fue apareciendo una serie de investigaciones sobre los orígenes de la sociedad que, conforme fueran ganando en autoridad —su campo de estudio no estaba del todo claro, al margen de una erudición vastísima—, acabarían cambiando la percepción que los contemporáneos tenían de sus propias sociedades y de sí mismos. *Ancient Law (El derecho antiguo)* de sir Henry Maine y *Das Muterrecht (El matriarcado)* de J. J. Bachofen en 1861, *Primitive Marriage (El matrimonio primitivo)* de J. F. McLennan en 1865 o *Primitive Culture (Cultura primitiva)* de E. B. Tylor en 1871, entre otras obras excepcionalmente bien concebidas y que combinaban el derecho, la historiografía, la filología, la mitología o la etnología, socavaban, seguramente sin proponérselo ni sospecharlo —pues sus autores no eran en modo alguno sospechosos de habérselo propuesto—, la confianza en un edificio construido durante siglos y que parecía haberse coronado con el conocimiento más escrupuloso sobre su construcción. «Todo lo que hemos ganado con la civilización se resquebraja», dirá sir Willoughby Patterne, el protagonista de la «comedia narrativa» de Meredith (así se subtitularía *El Egoísta* cuando apareciera en forma de libro en el otoño de 1879), que añadía a continuación: «Volvemos al mortero donde fuimos machacados y removidos» (véase *infra* cap. VI; «grieta» es una de las metáforas de *El Egoísta)* .

Absorto en la agonía de su madre que motivaba sus reflexiones en voz alta, sir Willoughby dirigía esas palabras casi sin darse cuenta a su prometida, Clara Middleton. Significativamente, como veremos, Willoughby es huérfano y heredero único de un padre al que solo se alude de pasada en el libro y que había muerto joven; con la excepción de su primo Vernon Whitford, Willoughby vive rodeado de mujeres en apariencia supeditadas a su voluntad y cuya opinión, sin embargo, le resulta temible en los momentos cruciales: está en juego algo más que su propia reputación y la supuesta estabilidad de la pequeña sociedad, predominantemente femenina, en la que vive. Las tres jóvenes damas a las que Willoughby se declarará a lo largo de la narración —Clara es la segunda de ellas— son, por su parte, huérfanas de madre y carecen, como el propio Willoughby y Vernon, de hermanos, lo que restringe la posibilidad de preservar las familias. Uno de los peligros del mortero, en aras de la distinción, es que la masa no ligue. La literatura inglesa ya contaba con un precedente de otro personaje egoísta, también llamado Willoughby, en *Sense and Sensibility (Sentido y sensibilidad)* de Jane Austen.

Tal vez entre las investigaciones que examinaban con meticulosa atención ese mortero original de la sociedad *La Cité antique (La ciudad antigua)* de Fustel de Coulanges, publicada en 1864, sea la obra que proporcione, con una radicalidad imprevista y mayor, en cierto modo, que la de ninguna otra de las obras mencionadas, los elementos de comparación más relevantes con la novela de Meredith a la hora de distinguir los ingredientes del mortero, antes y después de ser molidos. A pesar de la insistencia de Fustel de Coulanges en la necesidad logográfica de apoyarse documentalmente en las fuentes, sus planteamientos eran mucho más intuitivos que textuales y, como han señalado incluso sus críticos más favorables, podrían parecer arbitrarios hasta el punto de que la historia que contaba —un estudio sobre la religión, las leyes y las instituciones de Grecia y Roma— solo fuera, como en una obra de ficción, imaginariamente coherente.

Grecia y, sobre todo, Roma constituían el paradigma que regía la vocación clásica e imperial de Europa y toda su pedagogía: lo que no estaba en los textos no estaba en el mundo sobre el que Europa se proyectaba y del que empezaba a recibir testimonios etnográficos no tan contradictorios como cabría esperar, pero el reverso de la frase podría servir para caracterizar la novela —el género literario europeo por antonomasia — como espejo de la vida. Que lo que no había estado nunca en el mundo no podía estar tampoco en las novelas era, sin embargo, una apreciación insuficiente, y sobre Meredith siempre recaería la acusación de estar muy lejos de los personajes de sus libros, como observaría lord Dunsany en la primera edición crítica de *El Egoísta* publicada en Oxford en 1947, cuando la descolonización cuestionaba ya de un modo irreversible la hegemonía de los estudios clásicos. Más que con Grecia o Roma, las intuiciones de Fustel de Coulanges parecían tener que ver con la infancia de la humanidad, con sus deseos y temores ancestrales y, al igual que en la novela de Meredith la infancia y la juventud irremediablemente perdidas del «Egoísta» podían recobrarse con la mirada puesta en los rasgos adultos del protagonista, Fustel buscaba la expresión de esos deseos y temores ancestrales del grupo primordial en las características más reconocibles de la civilización moderna, que se resentía de ello.

En cualquier caso, había que saber encontrar lo que se buscaba en los textos y, más allá de los textos, en el mundo. Según Fustel de Coulanges, del culto primitivo a los antepasados habría surgido una estructura familiar organizada alrededor de las tumbas domésticas y el fuego conmemorativo de la que no había, sin embargo, ninguna constancia documental, sino solo un rasgo persistente de rechazo a la resignación por haber perdido algo que había desaparecido para siempre y que había que evocar continuamente hasta el punto, en ocasiones, de suplantarlo. Los muertos serían el fundamento de la religión y de la propiedad privada, instituciones sagradas en virtud de su antigüedad —*i. e.* de su permanencia sobre algo ausente—, de las

que era custodio el padre de familia y que legaba de una manera absoluta e indivisible a su primogénito *(heres neccessarius),* excluyendo a los hijos siguientes y la descendencia femenina. La prioridad religiosa de la propiedad privada respecto a una supuesta comunidad de los bienes era la auténtica cuestión disputada; en *El Egoísta* es una premisa tácita e indestructible: sir Willoughby siente cada separación como una afrenta personal a la adoración de sí mismo en la que se basa todo su prestigio y un menoscabo de cuanto posee.

Sea o no cierto que de la familia reunida alrededor del hogar surgiera la ciudad antigua por la agregación de otras familias y la ampliación del culto, en un proceso cuya oscuridad se hace patente en la novela de Meredith, los planteamientos de Coulanges en los dos primeros libros de su monografía parecían estar detrás de la vida social y de la imagen de la naturaleza humana que *El Egoísta* presentaría a sus lectores, quince años después, en el escenario de una Inglaterra rural que, teniendo en cuenta las pautas convencionales del siglo XIX , constituía en realidad un vestigio o una restitución, como si, en lugar de la idea de progreso que imperaba en la mentalidad de la época, las antigüedades se solaparan lentamente en el tiempo, indiscernibles de un proceso orgánico de regresión infinita. En 1864, Herbert Spencer había publicado, en medio del debate sobre la evolución de las especies, sus *Principles of Biology (Principios de biología),* donde acuñaría la expresión *survival of the fittest,* que saltaría muy pronto al campo de las ciencias sociales e incluso a las páginas de *El Egoísta:* la «familiaridad con la ciencia» de sir Willoughby «facilitaba el cultivo de la aristocracia» en la medida en que era un mero trabajo de comprobación y legitimación del resultado más adecuado (véase el capítulo V). La civilización, en efecto, podía no ser más que una aptitud hereditaria para la supervivencia o, como exponía Meredith en el primer capítulo, el uso del cuchillo. El laboratorio que Willoughby monta en la casa solariega es su contribución peculiar a la arquitectura de una casa dotada de una biblioteca excepcional y, sobre todo, de una bodega tan antigua como abundante, edificada sobre la exclusión de los menos favorecidos. La biblioteca y la bodega tendrán pasadizos insospechados entre sí y vincularán a sus usuarios al ser lugares simbólicos de reserva de un contenido valioso. El laboratorio de Willoughby no era experimental.

Ya no se trataría, entonces, de saber si las cosas habían sucedido alguna vez como Fustel de Coulanges las exponía, en un principio más o menos fabuloso —ni mucho menos de comprobar si Meredith lo había leído o no ni de si había leído a los antropólogos y biólogos británicos y alemanes para componer su novela—, sino de dar cuenta de si alguna vez habían dejado de serlo: *El Egoísta* podía ser una muestra de que, en lo esencial, las mismas costumbres se repetían una y otra vez, en un ejemplo de lo que Tylor había llamado la «supervivencia de la cultura» *(survival in culture)* o de lo que, de una manera mucho más certera, podríamos llamar simplemente las supersticiones de la propia civilización. La mera existencia de lo que ha existido alguna vez era una materia prima de inestimable valor para el novelista en la misma proporción en que era una fuente de legitimidad o de cohesión social: la supervivencia de la cultura mantiene viva la impresión de continuidad, de linaje. «En tiempo de Plutarco —escribía Fustel de Coulanges— se le decía al egoísta: tú sacrificas en el hogar. Eso significaba: te alejas de tus conciudadanos, no tienes amigos, tus semejantes no son nada para ti, no vives más que para ti y los tuyos» [1] . A los ojos de Fustel de Coulanges, la cita de un autor relativamente antiguo como Plutarco (probablemente espuria, por otra parte, aunque podría haber figurado al frente de *El Egoísta)* dejaba entrever una antigüedad aún mayor que definía con una precisión inequívoca «el horizonte de la moral y de los afectos», que en ningún caso —menos que en ninguno en el de sir Willoughby Patterne— podría ir más allá del estrecho círculo de la familia. (Véase el cap. XXXIX.)

Ἑστία θύεις. La frase no habría desde luego presentado dificultades a la hora de traducirla para el reverendo doctor Middleton, el padre de Clara, la segunda prometida de sir Willoughby y su gran rival en el interés del lector. Erudito clásico —su otra faceta como pastor eclesiástico quedará difuminada de acuerdo con el predominio de una religiosidad doméstica que no trasciende la adoración de sir Willoughby y, a través de él, de los Patterne, para quienes el matrimonio es una apropiación, un «rapto» o una «caza» más que un sacramento o un contrato—, el doctor Middleton asumía en la narración la patria potestad menor que le correspondía como padre de una hija única y que, en un momento crucial de la narración, era comparable explícitamente a la del Agamenón de Eurípides por su disposición a sacrificar a Clara en un altar distinto al familiar; de hecho, en el altar de otra familia, como Fustel de Coulanges prescribía para los matrimonios de las hijas. Pero, en este caso como en todo cuanto tiene que ver con *El Egoísta,* perderíamos el hilo de la narración si no recordáramos que se trata de una comedia, no de una tragedia, y que es precisamente el espíritu cómico lo que permite a Meredith reproducir, sin el riesgo inherente a una exposición histórica que pretende ser fiel a los hechos, lo que un discípulo de Fustel de Coulanges llamó «las estructuras elementales del parentesco», de las que depende toda la trama de la novela. Que el espíritu cómico, sin embargo, representara solo a medias las intenciones del autor —como Meredith le había confesado a Stevenson al terminar de escribir la novela— sugiere que la otra mitad suponía, al menos, una amenaza latente en la narración [2] .

Meredith había concebido al doctor Middleton a imagen y semejanza de Thomas Love Peacock, un excéntrico hombre de letras inglés —albacea del poeta romántico P. B. Shelley y autor de una breve obra

maestra, *Nightmare Abbey (Abadía Pesadilla),* sobre la que pesaba el cometido de enfrentarse a la impostura de la melancolía literaria— con cuya hija, Mary Ellen Nicolls, viuda y madre de una niña, Meredith se casaría en 1849 [3] . El fracaso del matrimonio inspiró a Meredith el largo poema *Modern Love (Amor moderno),* la más cercana a la tragedia de todas sus composiciones y la única que ahora está a la altura de *El Egoísta* . (Los cincuenta capítulos de *El Egoísta* reflejan hasta cierto punto los cincuenta sonetos de *Modern Love.)* Que Meredith ridiculizara en la figura del doctor Middleton la erudición inútil o decorativa, servicial e incluso sobornable, haría aún más patente que «la reversión al grosero original» —como leemos en el Preludio de *El Egoísta* — era algo a lo que nadie podía entregarse libremente en una biblioteca con la esperanza de lograrlo: los originales podían ser tipos corrientes en cualquier escala social. (Aún más grotesco y débil es, por supuesto, el profesor Crooklyn, el otro erudito de la novela. La biblioteca de la casa solariega —Patterne Hall, la Casa con mayúscula— y la casa de la gran dama Mountstuart Jenkinson, donde ambos estudiosos se encuentran en público, albergan las manifestaciones más convencionales del espíritu cómico contra ese saber estrafalario que Meredith ha duplicado deliberadamente.) Vernon Whitford, el *aspiring scholar,* sabe, por el contrario, que los seres humanos son ángeles del conocimiento sin poder evitar por eso ser demonios en la vida. Las aspiraciones de Vernon de convertirse en un escritor independiente en la ciudad se compensarán con su condición de montañero en los Alpes, la verdadera contraposición al mundo pastoral que la otra escritora del libro, la poetisa fracasada Leticia Dale —a quien Willoughby corteja durante toda su vida sin salir del recinto de su casa solariega— describe a la defensiva. Esa defensa del mundo pastoral encerrado en los límites de Patterne Park (y que, con otras denominaciones, constituye el escenario o el refugio de innumerables novelas inglesas) hace de su hipotético matrimonio con el protagonista un caso de lo que McLennan llamó por primera vez «endogamia». McLennan había observado ya la decadencia de la exogamia en las comunidades avanzadas.

El modelo para Vernon Whitford era sir Leslie Stephen, erudito y reformista político, amigo íntimo de Meredith y padre de la novelista Virginia Woolf, que no muchos años después elogiaría en Meredith a un gran innovador y subrayaría en su obra una cualidad experimental, abriendo con ello el camino a la crítica contemporánea. Comparar a Vernon Whitford con el personaje del señor Ramsay en *To the Lighthouse (Al faro,* 1927) de Woolf es un ejercicio menos literario que —por mantener la psicología escéptica que todos ellos compartían y emplear la palabra justa— antropológico: la diferencia que va de uno a otro es la de la generación de los hijos y la sucesión o transformación de la sociedad, algo que tendría su efecto en un género, como la novela —advertía Woolf—, que solo podía seguir existiendo si avanzaba, aunque la dirección no estuviera clara. Tanto las narraciones convencionales de Thomas Hardy como las obras rupturistas de James Joyce, o de la propia Woolf, podían aspirar a ser deudoras de Meredith. Woolf hace del señor Ramsay, modelado al mismo tiempo con el personaje de Vernon Whitford y con su padre, un filósofo fracasado. (Meredith era considerado un «filósofo» por sus compañeros de oficio. Joyce y lord Dunsany se referían a él con ese título.) No es impensable que, a su vez, Clara pudiera reflejarse como madre en los ojos de la señora Ramsay, a la que la novelista dota de un poder de atracción mucho mayor para los lectores. La trayectoria de la literatura inglesa desde el romanticismo de Shelley hasta el modernismo de Woolf —el marco de Meredith— sigue, en efecto, una misma corriente de conciencia a pesar de la tendencia a la oblicuidad o la extravagancia [4] .

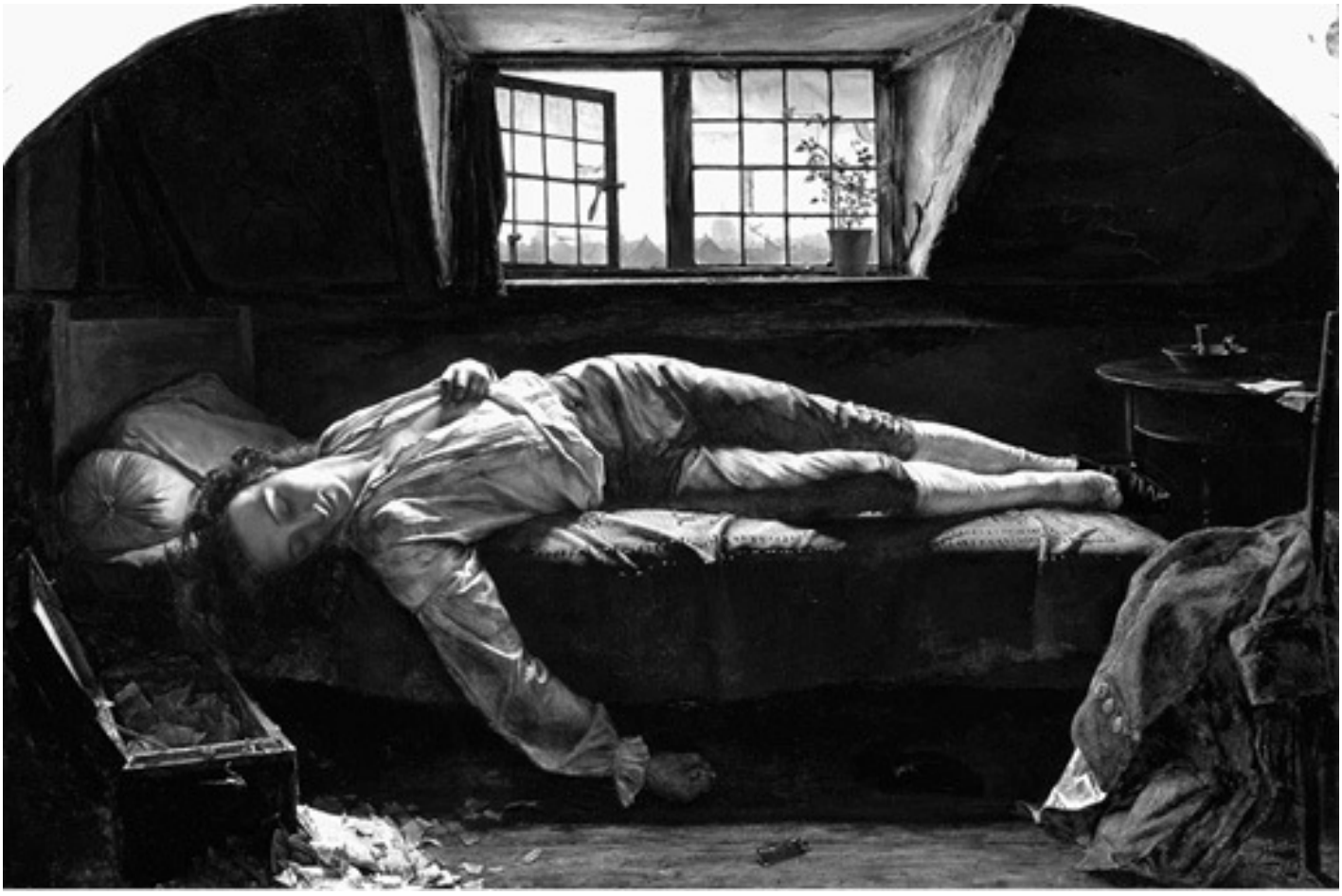
Ser ángeles del conocimiento y demonios en la vida es una frase de Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a quien encontramos en todas las encrucijadas de la vida espiritual moderna. Nietzsche se vanagloriaba de haber sido el único que había encontrado un acceso al mundo de los antiguos. Lessing era seguramente mucho más acreedor a ese título al complementarlo con el de haber descubierto algunos caminos de vuelta al mundo de los contemporáneos. El acceso al mundo de los antiguos —la *höhere Philologie* de la que Nietzsche, como Fustel de Coulanges o el doctor Middleton, eran, en realidad, epígonos— podía cegar el regreso a las condiciones de vida reales y no ser más que un episodio de nostalgia ornamental; la imagen de cubierta de esta edición, que reproduce un idilio de Teócrito con la óptica del pintor victoriano George Percy Jacomb-Hood, muestra que también podía ser, probablemente por las mismas razones, un episodio extremadamente violento [5] . En cualquiera de los dos casos Lessing habría opuesto la jovialidad y la delicadeza, y su defensa de la catarsis en la tragedia desde un punto de vista moral tiene también efectos terapéuticos.

Meredith pasó los dos únicos años formativos de su vida en una atmósfera lessinguiana. Nacido en 1828 en una familia de clase media de sastres de Portsmouth, Meredith se consideraba a sí mismo un digno heredero de su nombre, que lo vinculaba a la antigua realeza galesa. Tras recibir una modesta herencia a la muerte de su madre, cuando el futuro novelista contaba cinco años, recibió una instrucción formal rudimentaria. A los once años, la empresa familiar entró en quiebra y Meredith se hizo consciente de la distancia entre sus aspiraciones patricias y la realidad en la que vivía. En 1842, gracias a una nueva herencia familiar, pudo matricularse en la Escuela Morava de Neuwied, en Alemania, de donde regresaría a Inglaterra dos años después. Los biógrafos de Meredith subrayan la importancia del ambiente de la escuela y del paisaje

que la rodeaba, junto al Rin, pero lo decisivo era el modo como los *Herrnhuter,* según los había llamado Lessing, concebían la educación. En 1750, un joven Lessing resumiría la doctrina de la fraternidad fundada por el conde von Zinzendorf en un breve escrito apologético. El ser humano, escribió Lessing, ha sido creado para la acción, pero se pierde en elucubraciones que lo alejan de sí mismo. Lessing se volvía entonces al ejemplo socrático para advertir que es en el seno de cada uno donde han de explorarse las profundidades de la vida, donde ha de comprenderse y dominarse el ser humano en su relación con el mundo. Lessing cifraba en ello la filosofía práctica. Lo mismo servía para la religión. Lo que para el hombre era la comprensión y el dominio de sí mismo, lo era el espíritu para el cristianismo práctico. Olvidar esa dimensión práctica de la vida es lo que llevaba al ser humano a ser un ángel en el plano del conocimiento y un demonio en el plano de la vida *(Der Erkenntnis nach sind wir Engel, und dem Leben nach Teufel)* .

Pero el ejemplo socrático corregía a quienes solo vivían en un plano teórico olvidándose de la práctica. En *El Egoísta,* esa es la diferencia entre los eruditos Middleton y Crooklyn y el práctico Vernon Whitford: Vernon prescinde de la riqueza, se muestra inexorable consigo mismo y paciente con los demás (con Clara, con su pupilo el joven Crossjay), aprecia el mérito (especialmente de Leticia Dale y, cuando se cubre de vergüenza y desgracia, de Clara Middleton) y lo defiende contra la poderosa estulticia de sir Willoughby. Es Vernon quien le enseña al joven Crossjay a sentir la voz de la naturaleza en su corazón y a llevar la única máscara que el ser humano ha de ponerse en la vida [6] .

Vernon Whitford encarnaría, en efecto, todas las virtudes de los *Herrnhuter* salvo la creencia religiosa de la que Meredith se apartaría muy pronto en cualquier plano teórico. (Probablemente esa fuera la razón de que, a su muerte, no fuera enterrado en el Poet's Corner de la Abadía de Westminster.) En lo esencial, Meredith fue fiel al cristianismo práctico que había aprendido en Alemania y que se pondría muy pronto a prueba, a su regreso a Inglaterra en 1844, con dieciséis años, al tener que buscar una profesión. La encontró provisionalmente junto a un procurador londinense, Richard Charnock, que reunía a su alrededor a un grupo de jóvenes aspirantes a la poesía entre los que se encontraba Edward Peacock, con cuya hermana viuda Mary Ellen Nicolls se casaría Meredith al llegar a la mayoría de edad. Meredith publicaría en esa época su primer libro, *Poems (Poemas,* 1851), al que seguiría en 1855 una novela inspirada en las *Mil y Una Noches: The Shaving of Shagpat: An Arabian Entertainment (El afeitado de Shagpat: un entretenimiento árabe)*. Ninguna de las dos obras le procuró a Meredith un reconocimiento suficiente.



La muerte de Chatterton, de Henry Wallis

Meredith sirvió de modelo durante esa etapa al pintor Henry Wallis para su retrato de la muerte de Chatterton. El extremado romanticismo del cuadro, que cautivaría a un crítico tan exigente como John Ruskin cuando se presentara en 1856, escondía otro drama: Mary Ellen abandonaría a Meredith por el pintor, con quien se marchó a la isla de Capri en el verano de 1857 y con quien tuvo un hijo. Hasta la muerte de Mary Ellen en 1861, enferma y rechazada por Meredith, que no le permitiría ver al único hijo que habían tenido en común, el joven escritor probó suerte con la novela realista: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (La ordalía de Richard Feverel),* en la que Meredith ensayaría un primer estudio del Egoísta en la figura de sir Austin Feverel, se publicó en 1859. Mezcla de romance y tragedia, Meredith exploraba a través de la relación de un padre orgulloso y un hijo díscolo los motivos de la falta de afecto que luego analizaría magistralmente en *El Egoísta* . En 1860, con *Evan Harrington,* Meredith se serviría de sus recuerdos de infancia en la sastrería de su padre, y de su admiración por el *Sartor Resartus* de Thomas Carlyle, para analizar la diferencia insalvable entre las clases sociales.

Box Hill

En 1862 publicaría *Modern Love,* donde daría cuenta del fracaso matrimonial y se hundiría en la psicología de la tragedia humana: «La mañana —escribió en el soneto 43— no puede restaurar lo que hemos perdido», y añadía: «No veo pecado: el error es confuso». *Modern Love* es un largo poema compuesto de cincuenta sonetos de dieciséis versos, mucho más cerca de la prosa poética que de la lírica propiamente dicha, a la que, sin embargo, se acerca por su contenido. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, que admiraba a Meredith, emularía la fórmula en *The House of Life (La casa de la vida,* 1870-1881). Como en *El Egoísta,* el protagonista del poema

está dividido por la antigua admiración que profesa a una mujer que le ha abandonado y el amor que empieza a sentir por otra. La vacilación respecto al tono mismo de la obra se advierte en uno de los mejores sonetos, el 37:

> A lo largo de la terraza del jardín, bajo la cual
> un valle púrpura (iluminado en su extremo
> por la antorcha humeante sobre el borde de nubes
> por donde se desliza el carro) resplandece,
> caminamos en tranquila compañía y esperamos
> la campana de la cena en calma predigestiva.
> Tan dulcemente, hasta las laderas de violeta, el bálsamo del viento del sur
> respira alrededor que no nos preocupa si la campana se demora:
> aunque aquí y allá ancianos grises cuestionen el tiempo
> con toses irritadas. Con paso lento
> la lenta luna rosada, el rostro de la música callada,
> empieza a salir de su silenciosa morada.
> Mientras entramos y salimos, en el anochecer plateado,
> oigo la risa de Madam y discierno
> el talón de mi Lady delante de mí a cada giro.
> Nuestra tragedia ¿está viva o muerta?,

que podría pasar como un párrafo descriptivo de *El Egoísta* solo con devolverle al narrador la voz en primera persona. La comedia, no la tragedia, proporcionaría a Meredith el específico que necesitaba para curarse. La publicación de *Sandra Belloni* (publicada primero como *Emilia in England [Emilia en Inglaterra])* y un segundo matrimonio en 1864 despejaron el camino. Tras algunos años de trabajo como corresponsal de prensa y revisor de pruebas en una editorial, Meredith pudo adquirir la casa de Box Hill donde viviría hasta el final de su vida. Con *The Adventures of Harry Richmond (Las aventuras de Harry Richmond,* 1871) y *Beauchamp's Career (La carrera de Beauchamp,* 1875, la más política de sus producciones) el público reconoció su valor como creador de comedias románticas en las que las mujeres tenían un protagonismo muy poco apreciado hasta entonces en la literatura inglesa. *Beauchamp's Career* contiene, de pasada, una descripción de la situación del escritor en el umbral de la composición de *El Egoísta:*

> Me parezco a una isla del Ródano en la sequía de verano, pedregosa, sin atractivo y de difícil acceso entre las dos corrientes poderosas de lo irreal y lo suprarreal, que deleitan a la humanidad: ¡honra a los conspiradores! Mi gente no conquista nada, no gana nada; es real, aunque poco común. Es el reloj del cerebro lo que quiere poner en marcha y —¡pobre tropa de actores para las plazas vacantes!— apela a la conciencia que reside en la consideración de las cosas. Si sois impermeables a ella estamos perdidos; me vuelvo a mi desierto, donde, como os habréis dado cuenta, he adquirido el hábito de escuchar mi propia voz más de lo que resulta bueno [7] .

El Egoísta en 1879, *The Tragic Comedians (Los comediantes trágicos)* en 1880 y *Diana of the Crossways (Diana de las encrucijadas)* en 1885 consagrarían su reputación. Hasta su muerte en 1909 se sucederían el éxito y las desgracias personales (la muerte de su segunda esposa, la de su primer hijo, la enfermedad), mientras se convertía en el último gran representante, a los ojos de una sociedad que cambiaba rápidamente, de la época victoriana. *One of Our Conquerors (Uno de nuestros conquistadores,* 1891), *Lord Ormont and His Aminta (Lord Ormont y su Aminta,* 1894) y *The Amazing Marriage (El matrimonio asombroso,* 1895) fueron sus últimas novelas. James Joyce, Siegfried Sassoon y Virginia Woolf lo defenderían en la siguiente generación del olvido al que las vanguardias lo empujaban [8] .

Si, a propósito de la protagonista de *Diana of the Crossways* ha podido decirse que era una mujer shakespeareana, «otra Hermione», como la llama lady Dunstane en la novela, de Clara Middleton podría decirse que, además de Hermione, podría ser otra Perdita u otra Miranda, y lo mismo habría de decirse de Leticia Dale. Meredith insistiría en sus conversaciones en que Willoughby «es todos nosotros», de manera que *El Egoísta* —como escribió Stevenson— podía ser «un enmascaramiento cobarde, aunque extremadamente servicial de mí mismo», de cualquier lector [9] . Pero lo cierto es que Meredith cambió el título que la novela tenía al ser publicada por entregas, y que identificaba exclusivamente a sir Willoughby con el Egoísta, para que su comedia narrativa ofreciera una mayor ambigüedad, tanto en lo moral como en lo que en la actualidad constituye los estudios de género, al convertirse en libro. Al margen de la idiosincrasia de los personajes a los que podríamos considerar monstruos de vanidad sin que verdaderamente podamos pensar que son acreedores al título de la novela (lady Busshe, lady Culmer, el profesor Crooklyn y el doctor Middleton, el coronel De Craye y la formidable señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, todos ellos magníficamente secundarios), solo Vernon Whitford, el librepensador lessinguiano —a pesar de que se acuse de ello a sí mismo— y su pu-

pilo el joven Crossjay pueden decir que no son egoístas: hay en ellos una *nonchalance* tan marcada como la solicitud con la que piensan en los demás. Pero Leticia Dale y Clara Middleton se acusan con fundamento de egoísmo y Meredith, como narrador, aporta las pruebas de cargo necesarias.

> Que las mujeres nos digan —escribe Meredith— cuál es su lado en la batalla. Nosotros no somos tanto la prueba del Egoísta en ellas como ellas lo son para nosotros. Movimientos similares de damas coronadas y sin diadema de intrépida independencia sugieren su capacidad circunstancial para ser como los hombres cuando se les da la oportunidad de cazar. En la actualidad huyen y esa es la diferencia. Nuestra manera de cazar las informa de la criatura que somos (cap. XXIII).

La opinión del narrador, sin embargo, no es determinante en una comedia. Al asociar a Leticia y a Clara con los personajes shakespeareanos de la resurrección en el romance es imprescindible que la resurrección de la que hablamos no se entienda en el sentido religioso del término, sino en un sentido distinto para el que resulta muy difícil encontrar la palabra. En sus ensayos sobre las *remarriage comedies* del cine clásico de Hollywood, el filósofo recientemente fallecido Stanley Cavell invocaba la ascendencia shakespeareana y emersoniana aludiendo a la superación que los personajes logran como una «revisión y transfiguración de su manera de vivir», una suerte de perfeccionismo moral [10] . No es probable que pueda decirse de Willoughby que el aplazamiento de sus matrimonios le haya llevado a revisar y transfigurar su manera de vivir ni a perfeccionarse moralmente. Meredith es, al respecto, magistralmente elusivo al final de la novela. Pero las experiencias de Clara y de Leticia, que culminan en sus respectivos matrimonios, constituyen una revisión y transfiguración completas de su manera de vivir. Las dos últimas menciones de la palabra «egoísta» en la novela adquieren resonancias inequívocamente shakespeareanas, lo que quiere decir que Meredith es consciente de estar escribiendo, como el autor de *The Winter's Tale (Cuento de invierno),* un capítulo del texto de la vida moderna. Clara se acusa a sí misma de egoísmo y disculpa a Willoughby. Está despidiéndose de Leticia y rogándole que la ayude a olvidar quién había sido hasta entonces para encontrarse con quien verdaderamente es. El pasaje clave en lo que al egoísmo de Clara concierne es este: «Me alegraría pensar que he pasado un tiempo bajo tierra y he surgido de nuevo. Yo era la Egoísta. Estoy segura: si hubiera sido enterrada, no me habría levantado al verme tan vilmente manchada, sucia, desfigurada» (cap. XLVIII).

Pero Meredith reserva a Leticia que concluya la comedia narrativa con la última mención de la palabra «egoísta». Leticia se dirige a las tías de sir Willoughby, las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel, que conocen como nadie más en la tierra el carácter de su sobrino aunque nada pueda obligarlas a denunciarlo. Leticia no solo se acusa de egoísmo, sino que pone fin a la antigua religión que había predominado en la casa solariega, y al romanticismo que había predominado en la literatura matrimonial inglesa, y abre las puertas al matrimonio civilizado.

> —Queridas señoritas —les dijo Leticia al entrar—. Voy a herirlas y me apena hacerlo, pero mejor ahora que después si voy a vivir con ustedes. Willoughby me pide una mano que no puede aportar un corazón, porque el mío está muerto. Lo repito. Solía pensar en el corazón como la parte que una mujer aporta al matrimonio para el marido. Ahora veo que ella puede consentir, y él aceptarla, sin corazón. Pero es justo que ustedes sepan a qué voy a dar mi consentimiento. Una vez fui una boba muchacha romántica; ahora soy una mujer enferma y todas las ilusiones se han desvanecido. La privación ha hecho de mí lo que una fortuna abundante suele hacer de los demás. Soy una Egoísta. No las engaño. Ese es mi verdadero carácter. Mi perspectiva juvenil de Willoughby ha cambiado por completo y soy casi indiferente al cambio. Puedo esforzarme por respetarlo; no puedo venerarlo (cap. XLIX).

Que el matrimonio civilizado —el amor moderno— tuviera que ver con el desvanecimiento de las ilusiones es una historia que requería, como Virginia Woolf advirtió para la novela, un avance. Si *La prisonnière (La prisionera)* de Marcel Proust [11] o *To the Lighthouse* de la propia Woolf son un avance, o si la novela ha cedido el terreno al cine para proyectar las escenas de ese matrimonio, no forma parte de esta introducción dilucidarlo más allá de insinuar que la musa cómica podría apretar los labios.

María en la puerta de Simón, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. El pintor se inspiró en Meredith para el rostro de Cristo

1 Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité antique,* París, Flammarion, 2009, pág. 104. Véase la introducción de Arnaldo Momigliano a la traducción al inglés *(The Ancient City,* trad. de A. Momigliano y S. C. Humphreys, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, págs. ix-xiv). Fustel de Coulanges y Gustave Flaubert se turnarían como *raconteurs* en la corte de la emperatriz Eugenia —una extranjera—, siendo realistas tan auténticos como Meredith podría ser victoriano. Véase también Patricia O'Hara, «Primitive Marriage, Civilized Marriage: Anthropology, Mythology, and *The Egoist»,* en *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 20 (1992), págs. 1-24. 2 Véase George Meredith, *Ensayo sobre la comedia y los usos del espíritu cómico,* ed. de A. Lastra, Barcelona, Ediciones del Subsuelo, 2017. El *Ensayo sobre la comedia,* que data de 1877, es la poética de *El Egoísta:* el Preludio de la novela retoma la escritura de ensayo «como [...] nuestro modo de leer ágil y comprehensivamente». Recordemos que *Die Geburt der Tragödie (El nacimiento de la tragedia,* 1872) de Friedrich Nietzsche debía buena parte de su inspiración al intento de reconstrucción de la teoría aristotélica de la comedia que había llevado a cabo el filólogo Jacob Bernays en el contexto del verdadero significado de la catarsis. Una comparación entre los conceptos «nacimiento de la tragedia» y «espíritu de la comedia», con la pers-

pectiva del restablecimiento de la salud, resultaría esclarecedora al margen mismo de cualquier moral. Meredith se refiere a la comedia como un «específico». 3 Lampedusa reconocía en Peacock un «conocimiento meticulosamente preciso de la literatura inglesa» (Giuseppe Tomassi di Lampedusa, *Letteratura inglese,* Milán, Mondadori, 1991, vol. 2, pág. 125). Véase Thomas Love Peacock, *Abadía Pesadilla,* ed. de C. Pardo, Córdoba, El Olivo Azul, 2008. 4 Véase Virginia Woolf, «The Novels of George Meredith», en *Collected Essays,* Nueva York, Harcourt, 1967, vol. 1, págs. 224-232 (escrito un año después de *Al faro,* en 1928, como respuesta a la crítica devastadora de E. M. Forster a Meredith y publicado en la segunda serie de *The Common Reader* en 1932). Poco antes, Woolf había escrito otro ensayo, «The Niece of An Earl» («La sobrina de un conde»), en el que, aun alabando la osadía de Meredith para recorrer todo el espectro de las clases sociales inglesas, se preguntaba cuál «sería el arte de una época verdaderamente democrática» (págs. 219-223). 5 Véase *infra* cap. X: «Clara tenía el aspecto de una ninfa que hubiera contemplado demasiado tiempo al fauno e involuntariamente hubiera copiado su labio al acecho y la mirada que resbalaba largamente». Véase, sobre todo, el capítulo siguiente. 6 G. E. Lessing, «Pensamientos sobre los de Herrnhuter», en *Escritos filosóficos y teológicos,* ed. de A. Andreu Rodrigo, Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1982, págs. 145-152. Véase Marianne Doerfel, «British Pupils in a German Boarding School: Neuwied/Rhine 1820-1913», en *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 34/1 (1986), págs. 79-96. 7 *Beauchamps' Career,* Londres, The British Library, Historical Print Editions, 1911, cap. 48 (citado en Walter Jerrold, *George Meredith. An Essays Towards Appreciation,* Londres, Greening & Co., 1902, págs. 131-132). 8 Habría que añadir a la enumeración de las obras de Meredith las narraciones menores publicadas entre 1877 y 1879 y estrechamente conectadas con el *Ensayo sobre la Comedia* y *El Egoísta:* «The House on the Beach» («La casa de la playa»), «The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper» («El caso del general Ople y lady Camper») y «The Tale of Chloe» («El cuento de Cloe»), que se publicaron, como la primera versión del *Ensayo sobre la comedia,* en la *New Quarterly Magazine* . Véase *George Meredith's Essay on Comedy and Other New Quarterly Magazine Publications,* A Critical Edition, by M. C. Ives, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1998. A esas narraciones habría que sumar otra inédita e inacabada, «The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen», que constituye una extraña obra maestra. Véase Alice Crossley, «I Fear I Have the Heart of a Boy: Age Consciousness and Age Difference in George Meredith's *The Gentleman of Fifty and the Damsel of Nineteen»,* en *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies,* 13/2 (2017), disponible en <http://www.ncgs-journal.com/issue132/issue132.htm >.

9 Robert Louis Stevenson, «Books Which Have Influenced Me», Londres, Hodder & Stoughton, 1897, págs. 12-13.

10 Véase Stanley Cavell, *Ciudades de palabras. Notas pedagógicas sobre un registro de la vida moral,* ed. de J. Alcoriza y A. Lastra, Valencia, Pre-Textos, 2007.

11 Véase Ramon Fernandez, «Meredith» (1926), en *Messages,* París, Grasset, 2009. Fernandez daba cuenta de la traducción francesa de Yvonne Canque, *L'Égoïste. Comédie sous forme de récit* (París, Gallimard, 1924). *La prisonnière* había aparecido póstumamente el año anterior.

ESTA EDICIÓN

La edición de referencia de las obras de George Meredith es la conocida como Memorial Edition publicada por Archibald Constable en Londres entre 1909 y 1911 e inmediatamente después por Scribner's en Nueva York. En el caso de *El Egoísta,* reproduce sin variaciones la edición que la editorial londinense había publicado en 1897 bajo la supervisión del autor, que apenas hizo modificaciones a la primera edición en forma de libro de 1879. Como señaló George Woodcock, esas modificaciones «no representan nada más que un último pulido de una obra que estaba más cerca de la perfección que ninguna otra que [Meredith] escribiera». He anotado las tres modificaciones más significativas para una traducción y seguido la edición de 1897 en la línea de los editores posteriores a 1911. Todas las notas al pie son del editor.

He mantenido el uso de las mayúsculas en algunas de las palabras clave del libro, como «Egoísta» o «Casa», y tratado de conservar la literalidad de un estilo que tenía a su disposición todos los recursos narrativos y las matizaciones del espíritu cómico. Oscar Wilde tenía sobradas razones para admirar a Meredith.

Hay dos traducciones de *El Egoísta* al español, que no he podido consultar y que son difíciles de encontrar. Salvo un artículo de Alfonso Reyes, donde se refiere a *El Egoísta* como una «comedia en forma de relato», y vagas menciones de Jorge Luis Borges —que probablemente sugiriera la traducción en la editorial argentina Emecé—, la obra de Meredith no parece haber despertado demasiado interés en español hasta hace relativamente poco. Eugenio d'Ors anotó, para el público catalán, el interés que su obra despertó en Francia por la influencia sobre Marcel Proust.

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EL EGOÍSTA

UNA COMEDIA NARRATIVA

PRELUDIO

Un capítulo en el que solo la última página tiene importancia

La comedia es un juego que consiste en arrojar reflexiones sobre la vida social y que trata de la naturaleza humana en el salón de hombres y mujeres civilizados, donde el polvo de las luchas del mundo exterior, la suciedad o las colisiones violentas no son necesarios para que la corrección de la representación resulte convincente. La credulidad no ronda los sentidos impresionables ni recurrimos al pequeño brillo circular de la lente del relojero para elevar en brillante relieve muestras minuciosas de la evidencia de la incredulidad. El Espíritu Cómico concibe una situación definida para un grupo de personajes y rechaza todo lo accesorio en una busca exclusiva de esos personajes y su forma de hablar. Siendo un espíritu, acecha al espíritu en los hombres; la visión y el ardor constituyen su mérito: ni por un momento ha pensado en persuadirnos de que lo creamos. Sigamos y veremos. Pero es discutible el valor de una carrera en sus talones.

Ahora bien, el mundo está en posesión de un gran libro, el mayor libro de la tierra, que podría llamarse, de hecho, el Libro de la Tierra y cuyo título es el de Libro del Egoísmo, un libro lleno de la sabiduría del mundo. Tan lleno está de ella y de tales dimensiones es ese libro, en el que cada generación ha escrito desde que los hombres escriben, que necesita una poderosa comprensión para resultarnos provechoso.

¿Quién, dice el notable humorista en alusión a ese libro, quién puede viajar deliberadamente a través de la extensión de sus hojas, que va desde Lizard hasta la pobre morralla pulmonar de ligas que bailan de puntillas por el frío, nos dicen los exploradores, y cobran aliento con la buena suerte, como los perros con los huesos alrededor de la mesa, al borde del polo? [12] . Una longitud invariablemente desmesurada, profundamente remota, pesa en el corazón y nos hace envejecer al contemplarla. ¿Qué ocurre si nos las arreglamos para imprimir una de nuestras páginas en la cabellera de ese majestuoso forastero solitario? Con esfuerzo podríamos incluir al humorista en el libro, pero ¡el conocimiento que nos falta no estará más presente ante nosotros de lo que lo estaba cuando los capítulos terminaban en el acantilado que ya conocemos en Dover, donde se sienta nuestro señor y maestro contemplando el reflejo de los mares exteriores en los interiores! [13] .

En otras palabras, como me atrevo a traducir al humorista (los humoristas son difíciles: confundirnos forma parte de su humor), el espejo interior, el espíritu abarcador y condensador, ha de darnos esas interminables piedras miliares de materia (que se extienden casi hasta el polo) en esencia, en muestras escogidas, digeriblemente. Lo concibo indicando que el método realista de una transcripción consciente de todo lo visible, y una repetición de lo audible, es el principal responsable de nuestro exceso de cáscara y de la prolongación de lo vasto y ruidoso, de donde, como de una ciénaga sin drenar, fluye la enfermedad de la semejanza, nuestra enfermedad moderna. Estamos enfermos, cualquiera que sea la cura o la causa. Le procuramos a la ciencia el otro día un cuerpo como antídoto, lo que fue como si andarines cansados tuvieran que manejar el motor de trenes apresurados, y la ciencia nos presentó a nuestros queridos ancestros, sentados a la manera oriental, por lo que mantuvimos un parloteo primordial que rivalizara con la selva amazónica al anochecer, imaginando que estábamos curados. Antes de que rompiera el día, la enfermedad colgaba de nuevo de nosotros con la extensión de una cola. La teníamos antes y la tendremos después. Somos los mismos: animales de oferta. Eso es todo lo que sacamos de la ciencia [14] .

El arte es el específico. Tenemos poco que aprender de los monos y pueden quedar a un lado. Nuestra principal consideración es qué clase de práctica artística particular en las letras es la mejor para leer atentamente el libro de nuestra sabiduría común de manera que, con mentes más despejadas y modales más vivaces, escapemos, por decirlo así, de una tierra de sirenas de niebla a la luz del día y el canto. ¿Lo leeremos con la lente del relojero en círculos luminosos salidos de lo infinitesimal o señalado con ejemplos y tipos bajo la amplia provisión alpina de espíritu nacida de nuestra inteligencia social unida, en lo que consiste el Espíritu Cómico? Los sabios dicen lo último. Nos dicen que hay una tendencia constante en el libro a acumular excesos de sustancia y esa repleción, que enturbia el vaso que ofrece a la humanidad, nos vuelve imprecisos en el reconocimiento de nuestros rostros individuales: algo peligroso para la civilización. Esos sabios se muestran firmes en su opinión de que deberíamos alentar el Espíritu Cómico, que es, al fin y al cabo, un retoño nuestro que da relieve al libro. La comedia, dicen, es la verdadera diversión, del mismo modo que es la clave del gran libro, la música del libro. Nos dicen cómo condensa secciones enteras del libro en una frase, volúmenes en un personaje, de manera que una buena parte de un libro que al desenrollarse cubre miles de leguas se resume en una situación cómica.

Verdaderamente, nos dicen, hemos de leer cuanto podamos de ese libro, al menos la página que tenemos delante, si queremos ser hombres. Alguien, con el índice en el libro, exclama con un estilo perdonable por su fervor: el remedio de nuestra espantosa aflicción está aquí, en la destiladora de la comedia, no en la ciencia ni en la velocidad, que no es más que otro nombre para la voracidad. Para estar vivos, para la agilidad del alma, ha de haber diversidad en los latidos acompasados de nuestro pulso. Examinémoslos. Se agolpan como las patas del caballo percherón o hacen su trabajo como los sacudidores de polvo de las alfombras o el péndulo de la casa de campo que enseña al niño la hora con la sencilla aritmética de la medianoche. También esto a pesar de Baco. Dejémoslos galopar; dejémoslos galopar con el dios tirando de las riendas; galopen al Himen o galopen al Hades, pulsan la misma nota. ¡La monstruosa arpía de la monotonía nos rodea como si tuviera los brazos de Anfítrite! [15] . Oímos un grito de guerra como diversión. Ese alguien se refiere a la comedia como a nuestro modo de leer ágil y comprehensivamente. La comedia propone la corrección de la pretenciosidad, de la inflación, de la estupidez, de los vestigios de crudeza y grosería que encontramos en nosotros. Es la última civilizadora, la refinadora, una dulce cocinera. Aunque, nos dice, la comedia vigila nuestro sentimentalismo con una vara de abedul, no se opone al romance. Podemos amar, y amar con calidez, mientras seamos honestos. No ofendamos a la razón. Un enamorado demasiado pretencioso caerá en su trampa. En la comedia es la escena singular de la caridad que surge del desdén bajo el golpe de la risa honorable: un Ariel liberado por la varita de Próspero de las cadenas de la maldita bruja Sycorax [16] . Esa risa de la razón refrescada florece como la mágica galerna de la taimada primavera que se decanta por el verano. La oímos darle a ese delicado espíritu su libertad. Escuchemos, por comparación, una sociedad sin levadura: ¡un mugido semejante al de una vaca lechera después de ordeñarla! ¡Ah un eclesiástico titulado que amenazara con la excomunión algo tan profano! Tal vez un entusiasta, pero habría que oírlo.

Respecto al patetismo, ningún barco puede zarpar sin él ni estamos por completo faltos de patetismo, que, no sabría exactamente decir qué es si no el balasto reducible a humedad mediante un proceso patente, está a bordo de nuestro moderno bajel, pues no puede ser la carga y la provisión general de agua tiene otros usos, y los barcos con un buen cargamento de ello parecen navegar de una manera más pesada: hay un toque de patetismo. El Egoísta seguramente inspira piedad. El que desea vestirse a costa de cualquiera y, a causa de ese deseo, es condenado a desnudarse por completo, ese, si el patetismo ha tenido forma alguna vez, podría ser tomado por la persona en cuestión. Solo que no le está permitido arremeter contra nosotros, arrollarnos y salpicarnos de gotas saladas. Esa es la innovación.

Tal vez lo hayamos conocido fuera de sí, como a un caballero de nuestro tiempo y nuestro país, rico y bien situado, con una figura sin flexibilidad, hagamos lo que hagamos con él, cuyo humor apenas turba la superficie ni es indistinguible salvo para duendes penetrantes, perversos, cuyos golpes bajos imperceptiblemente inadecuados a su dignidad han vuelto conscientes a los ángeles literariamente tiernos de algo cómico en él, cuando tuvieron, todos a una, que describir sin rodeos al caballero en el encabezamiento del registro (la brevedad es de agradecer) como un caballero de familia y propiedades, un ídolo de una isla decorosa que admira lo concreto. Los duendes tienen su extraña perversidad para iluminar una visión detectivesca: les gusta malignamente descubrir el ridículo en figuras imponentes. Dondequiera que avistan el Egoísmo plantan sus tiendas, se acuclillan en círculo y apagan sus linternas, seguros del absurdo que se aproxima. Tan seguros que, si cogen a un caballero inglés cuyo juego han espiado, no lo sueltan hasta que empieza sin darse cuenta a retozar y hacer el ganso, sin saberlo, en su salsa, que es el aroma de la caza. Enseguida se retuercen, Egoísta y duendes. Han custodiado una gran casa durante siglos y presenciado el nacimiento de todos los nuevos herederos en sucesión, tomando diligentemente notas de confirmación para chocar las manos y cantar a coro en uno de los alegres corros alrededor del tambaleante pilar de la casa cuando les llega su turno, como si hubieran (posiblemente lo hayan hecho) olfateado de antiguo un condenado coloso de Egoísmo en el heredero no nacido ni concebido de la cepa familiar. No se atreverán a reírse mientras el Egoísmo sea valiente, sobrio, socialmente valioso, nacionalmente útil. Esperan.

En otro tiempo un Egoísmo grande y viejo construyó la Casa. Podría parecer que esencias suyas cada vez más tenues hicieran falta para sostener la estructura, pero en especial parece que una reversión al grosero original, por debajo de la máscara y en una vena de finura, sea un terremoto en los cimientos de la Casa. Habría sido mejor no consentir el movimiento y aferrarse tercamente a los usos ancestrales que haber alimentado ese espectro anacrónico. La vista, sin embargo, hará que nuestros duendes acuclillados en círculo se inquieten, mientras aguzan la mirada y aprestan el oído, para el comienzo del drama cómico del suicidio. Aunque este verso no se encuentre aún en nuestra literatura,

Se mató a sí mismo por amarse tanto,

admitámoslo como su epitafio.

12 El Libro del Egoísmo cubriría desde la península de Lizard en Cornualles hasta el norte de las Islas Británicas.

13 Alusión al acto IV del *Rey Lear* de Shakespeare. Meredith contrapone el Espíritu Cómico a la tragedia.

14 El debate sobre la evolución era relativamente reciente en Inglaterra tras la publicación en 1859 de *El origen de las especies* de Charles Darwin.

15 Himen (matrimonio), Hades (infierno), Anfítrite (la ninfa que acogía en su seno a los ahogados).

16 Alusión al acto I de *La tempestad* de Shakespeare.

I

Un incidente menor que muestra una aptitud hereditaria para el uso del cuchillo

HUBO una vigilancia ominosamente ansiosa de ojos visibles e invisibles sobre la infancia de Willoughby, quinto descendiente de Simon Patterne, de Patterne Hall, cabeza de la familia, abogado, hombre de sólidas adquisiciones y denodada ambición, que había entendido perfectamente el trabajo de fundación de una Casa y estaba dotado del poder de decir no a los primeros agentes de destrucción: los parientes al acecho. Lo dijo con el énfasis resonante de la muerte a los hijos más jóvenes [17] . Si el roble ha de convertirse en un árbol majestuoso hemos de protegerlo del acaparamiento de leña. Tampoco el árbol infestado de parásitos prospera. Realmente podemos decir que una gran Casa vive en sus inicios del cuchillo. El suelo es fácil de conseguir, y lo son los ladrillos, y una esposa, y los hijos vienen con desearlos, pero el uso vigoroso del cuchillo es un don natural y apunta al crecimiento. Los Patterne pobres eran numerosos cuando la quinta cabeza de la raza era la esperanza de su condado. Un Patterne estaba en los marines.

El país y el jefe de esa familia estaban simultáneamente informados de la existencia de un teniente Crossjay Patterne, del cuerpo de los famosos y duros luchadores, por un acto de heroísmo, propio de la especie genial sin pretensiones de la sangre inglesa, del modesto y joven oficial en el ataque a una fortaleza ribereña en oriente, en alguna parte de la costa de China. La juventud del oficial se asumió por la fuerza de su rango, tal vez del mismo modo que la historia de su modestia: «Solo había cumplido con su deber». Nuestro Willoughby estaba entonces en la universidad, émulo del generoso entusiasmo de sus años y extrañamente impresionado por el informe y por su nombre impreso en los periódicos. Pensó en ello durante varios meses cuando, al hacerse cargo de su título y herencia, envió al teniente Crossjay Patterne un cheque por una suma de dinero equivalente a la paga anual del galante soldado, mostrando, al mismo tiempo, su familiaridad con los primeros, o químicos, principios de la generosidad al observar a sus amigos en casa que «la sangre es más espesa que el agua». El tipo es un marine, pero es un Patterne. Cómo se ha desviado un Patterne a los marines es una pregunta absurdamente planteada en el gran dispensario. En la carta de elogio que acompañaba al cheque, se invitaba al teniente a presentarse en la ancestral casa solariega cuando le fuera posible y se le aseguraba que le había proporcionado a su pariente y amigo un gusto por la vida del soldado. Al joven sir Willoughby le encantaba hablar de su «tocayo militar y primo lejano, el joven Patterne, el marine». Era divertido y no menos risible era la descripción del gesto de valor de su tocayo: con el marinero británico borracho rescatado y la captura de los tres valientes del dragón negro en terreno amarillo, a los que había atado espalda contra espalda con sus coletas y llevado a nuestras líneas mediante un estilo recién inventado de marcha agonizante en oblicuo, como los asombrados seis ojos de los prisioneros celestiales, pues no podían caminar erguidos. El humor de los caballeros en casa se excita siempre sobremanera con esos hechos ligeros. Somos una isla pequeña, pero ya veis lo que hacemos. Las damas de la casa, la madre de sir Willoughby y sus tías Eleanor e Isabel, estaban más afectadas que él por la circunstancia de tener a un Patterne en los marines. Pero ¡cómo! Nosotros, los ingleses, tenemos sangre ducal en los negocios: los genealogistas nos dicen que tenemos sangre real en los oficios comunes. A pesar de nuestro orgullo somos un pueblo raro y podemos pedir la carne a un carnicero de los Tudor, sentados en las sillas de mimbre de un Plantagenet. Luego podemos... Pero conservemos nuestra reverencia. El joven Willoughby hizo de su galante primo lejano un melenudo o un héroe del fútbol y se maravilló ocasionalmente de que el tipo se hubiera despachado con una carta de efusiva gratitud sin aprovecharse de la invitación para participar de la hospitalidad de los Patterne.

Una tarde se encontraba al amparo de las enramadas en la majestuosa terraza de la casa solariega, en compañía de su prometida, la hermosa y elegante Constanza Durham, seguido de grupos de damas y caballeros deseosos de aire fresco antes de la cena que iba a tener lugar. Al azar de su habitual buena fortuna (llamamos azar a las cosas que nos pasan a causa de ese gran dispensario), sir Willoughby observó la avenida de tilos, a punto de girar los talones al final de la terraza, y, ha de añadirse, mientras conversaba con el privilegio de la pasión de la pasión del amor con la señorita Durham y, siendo cualquier cosa excepto obtuso, tuvo un presentimiento al observar a un hombre rechoncho y achaparrado que cruzaba el espacio de grava desde la avenida hasta los escalones delanteros de la casa, decididamente carente del sello del caballero «en su sombrero, su abrigo, sus pies o cualquier cosa que fuera suya», como Willoughby observó enseguida ante las damas de su familia con el estilo escritural de los caballeros que lo tienen. El breve esbozo de la criatura era repulsivo. El visitante llevaba una bolsa y el cuello de su abrigo estaba levantado; su sombrero era me-

lancólico y tenía la apariencia de un comerciante en bancarrota que tratara de esconderse, sin guantes ni paraguas.

Hemos de advertir que el incidente fue muy poca cosa. Le entregaron la tarjeta de visita del teniente Patterne a sir Willoughby, que la dejó en la bandeja y le dijo al lacayo: «No estoy en casa».

¡Le había decepcionado la edad, le había desilusionado groseramente la apariencia del hombre que pretendía ser su pariente de esa inapropiada manera y su agudo instinto le advirtió rápidamente del absurdo de presentar a sus amigos a un veterano completamente impresentable como el célebre y galante teniente de marines y al mismo como miembro de su familia! Había hablado demasiado de él, con demasiado entusiasmo, para ser capaz de hacerlo. Un joven subalterno, aun con una figura pasablemente vulgar, podría haber servido con ayuda de la heroica historia humorísticamente exagerada como disculpa por su aspecto. Nada podía hacerse con un maduro y achaparrado marine de esa clase. La consideración lo sacó del lugar sin discusión. Fue un gesto de un caballero experto desde muy temprano en el arte de cortar.

El joven sir Willoughby le dijo una palabra sobre el rechazado visitante a la señorita Durham en respuesta a su mirada de asombro: «Le he dejado caer un cheque», dijo, pues parecía personalmente herida y tenía el rostro enrojecido.

La joven no contestó.

Desde la humilde partida del teniente Crossjay Patterne por la avenida de tilos bajo un cielo que amenazaba lluvia, el círculo de duendes que rodeaba a sir Willoughby se mantuvo en su sitio observando estrictamente sus movimientos a todas horas y, si hicieran falta las comparaciones, el simpático entusiasmo de los ojos de los monos enjaulados por la mano que los alimenta proporcionaría una. Percibieron en él un desarrollo incipiente y una manifestación muy sutil de aquella cosa tan vieja de la que había brotado.

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17 La primogenitura era la base de la sociedad inglesa. Véase la Introducción.

II

El joven sir Willoughby

AQUELLOS pequeños duendes traviesos, que habían adquirido cierta respetabilidad como perros y mascotas del Espíritu Cómico, habían estado curiosamente atentos tres años antes, mucho antes del anuncio público de su compromiso con la hermosa señorita Durham, el día de la mayoría de edad de sir Willoughby, cuando la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson pronunció su palabra sobre él. La señora Mountstuart era una señora de la que se podía estar seguro de que diría algo para recordar, si no lo correcto. Una y otra vez se confirmó, en días de grandes celebraciones, días de nacimiento o de boda, lo segura que estaba de dar en la diana, y su palabra recorrió el condado y, si hubiera sido una mujer sin caridad, habría gobernado el condado con una vara de hierro de caricatura por lo agudo que era su toque. Un grano de malicia habría torcido la aceptación de rostros y caracteres. Era rica y amable y se parecía a nuestra madre naturaleza en sus razonables antipatías por una o dos cosas que nadie defiende y su decidida preferencia por personas que relucen al sol. Su palabra brotaba de ella. Nos miraba y salía y se nos pegaba como nada elaborado ni literario podría haberse adherido. Lo que dijo de Leticia Dale: «Ahí viene, con un cuento romántico en las pestañas», era un retrato de Leticia, y lo de Vernon Whitford: «Es un Febo Apolo convertido en fraile abstinente», pintaba de golpe la lóbrega brillantez del magro y estirado caminante y estudioso.

De sir Willoughby su palabra fue breve y tuvo mérito un día en el que el joven no dejó de oír, del amanecer a la salida de la luna, saludos en su honor, cantos de alabanza y elogios ciceronianos. Rico, encantador, cortés, generoso, señor de la casa solariega, la fiesta y la danza, excitaba a sus invitados de ambos sexos a un domingo de adulación. Y dice la señora Mountstuart mientras grandes frases se articulaban a su alrededor: «Ya ven que tiene una pierna».

Y lo vimos, desde luego. Pero, una vez lo hubo dicho, vimos mucho más. La señora Mountstuart lo dijo igual que otros proferían naderías, sin muestra alguna de insistencia. Se aceptó su palabra y, muy pronto, desde el extremo del amplio salón, fue claramente perceptible la circulación de algo de la señora Mountstuart. Lady Patterne envió a una pequeña Hebe a que sorteara a los que bailaban y le informara con precisión y ni siquiera los desagradecidos labios de una dama muy joven, al transmitir la palabra, pudieron reducir la impresión de su imponente sinceridad. ¡Era perfecta! La adulación de la belleza y el ingenio del joven sir Willoughby, de su porte y maneras aristocráticos, de sus virtudes morales, era corriente: bienvenidas, si lo preferimos, como una forma de homenaje; pero corriente, casi vulgar, junto al tranquilo y suave toque natural de la señora Mountstuart. Al parecer que decía infinitamente menos que los demás, como la señorita Isabel Patterne señaló a lady Busshe, la señora Mountstuart comprendía todo cuanto habían dicho los demás al mostrar que no era necesario aludir a lo que era de sobra evidente. Era la aristócrata que recrimina al provinciano. «Es todo cuanto han tenido ustedes la bondad de observar, damas y queridos caballeros; habla de una manera encantadora, baila divinamente, cabalga con el aire de un comandante en jefe, adopta la gran pose más natural posible sin dejar de ser ni por un momento el joven caballero inglés que es. Alcibíades, recién salido de las manos del peluquero de Luis XIV, no lo habría superado. Lo que ustedes quieran. Podría superarles en comparaciones sublimes si tuviera que bombardearlo. ¿Se han dado cuenta de que tiene una pierna?».

Podría ampliarse. Una palabra en apariencia sencilla de esa importancia es el triunfo de lo espiritual y, por donde pasa por una moneda de valor, la sociedad alcanza un elevado refinamiento: Arcadia por la ruta estética. La observación de Willoughby no se dirigía, como la señorita Eleanor Patterne señaló a lady Culmer, de la pierna hacia abajo, sino que lo estimaba de la pierna hacia arriba. Sin embargo, eso era prosaico. Detengámonos un momento en la palabra de la señora Mountstuart y a qué hermosa región, con qué sensación tan decorosamente voluptuosa, no volaremos quienes sentimos, por una dolorosa veneración de Carlos el Mártir, una galante adhesión a la corte de su Alegre Hijo, donde la pierna se orlaba de lazos de amor y reinaba. ¡Oh era una corte picante! Sin embargo, soñamos con ella como el periodo en el que el caballero inglés era la gracia encarnada, lejos del patán que ahora nos fastidia en otra esfera; de hermosas maneras, dulce en cada gesto. Y si las damas fueran... Esperamos que se lo hayan traducido. Pero si lo fueran, si fueran demasiado tiernas, ¡ah entonces los caballeros serían caballeros, dignos de morir por ellos! Este sueño persiste en la campiña inglesa y ha de ser una aspiración tras una forma de caballerosidad melodiosa que imaginamos que habitó una vez en la isla, igual que entre nuestros poetas el placer de la imaginación ha alentado el sueño de un periodo del círculo de la caballería.

La señora Mountstuart había tocado una cuerda vibrante. «A pesar del odioso atuendo moderno de los hombres, ya ven que tiene una pierna».

Es decir, la pierna del caballero nato está ante nosotros y, aunque lo oscurezcamos a capricho y lo vistamos de un modo degenerado, ahí está para las damas que tengan ojos. La *vemos* o vemos que *él* la tiene. La señorita Isabel y la señorita Eleanor discutieron la incidencia del énfasis, pero seguramente, aunque pudiera oírse una ligera diferencia de sentido, cualquiera podía hacerlo: muchos, con una buena muestra de razón, pusieron el acento sobre *pierna* y las damas dieron por hecho que la pierna de Willoughby era exquisita; tenía un traje de caballero de la corte en su armario. La señora Mountstuart quiso decir que había que ver la pierna porque era una pierna ardiente. ¡Ahí está y *brillará* ! Tenía la pierna de Rochester, Buckingham, Dorset, Suckling [18] ; la pierna que sonríe, que parpadea, es un obsequio para nosotros, aunque tal vez a causa de la belleza que se satisface a sí misma, que centellea en un suave intermedio entre la imperiosidad y la seducción, la audacia y la discreción; entre «Me adorarás» y «Soy un devoto tuyo»; alternativamente y en uno nuestro señor, nuestro esclavo. Es una pierna de mareas altas y bajas y oleaje. Esa pierna, cuando finja retirarse, irá derecho al corazón de las mujeres. Nada es tan fatal para ellas.

Ha de satisfacerse a sí misma. La humildad no conquista las multitudes ni el sexo. En vano tiene lustre. Las melodías cautivadoras (para probar la inevitabilidad de la autosatisfacción cuando sabemos que hemos alcanzado la perfección), escuchadas con atención, suenan internamente a esa arrogancia casi ridícula cuando detectamos el gorjeo.

No hace falta recordar que tiene la pierna sin ser picante. Vemos eminente en él lo que de buen grado procuraríamos a una nación que hubiera perdido su pierna al ganar una moralidad posiblemente más limpia. A menudo se impugna eso, pero no hay duda de la pérdida de la pierna.

Bien, los lacayos y los cortesanos y los habitantes de las Tierras Altas de Escocia y el *corps* de ballet y también los lecheros tienen piernas, suficientemente torneadas. Pero ¿qué son? No el instrumento de modulación al que nos referimos: simplemente piernas para el trabajo de las piernas, mudas como los brutos. La de nuestro caballero es la pierna poética, un portento, una valentía. La tiene como Cicerón tenía una lengua. Es un laúd para esparcir canciones a su amada; un florete, si es obstinada. En realidad, una pierna con sesos en ella, alma.

Y sus sombras son una emboscada, sus luces una sorpresa. Se ruboriza, empalidece, susurra, exclama. Es un asomo, una revelación parcial, apenas soportable, del dios olímpico: Júpiter jugando a caballero de alfombra.

Para la familia del joven sir Willoughby y sus ponderados admiradores no supone demasiado decir que la pequeña palabra de la señora Mountstuart trajo una época de nuestra historia para darle color a la tarde de su llegada a la posición del hombre. Él era todo cuanto la Alegre Corte de Carlos debía haber sido sin quitarle una centella de lo que fue. Bailaba a esa luz y podíamos ver el efecto en su compañía [19] .

Había recibido la educación doméstica de un príncipe. Los pequeños príncipes abundan en una tierra de riquezas acumuladas. Donde no han cumplido un servicio militar para un amo imperial son necesariamente delicados aquí y allá durante la juventud, a veces inmanejables y, en la medida en que no tienen un deber personal con el estado, cada uno vive para sí mismo, en todo el presente y, lo que es más, con una perspectiva de ocio suntuoso para la práctica de esa adhesión. A veces eso los enerva: habría de darse en países continentales. Felizmente nuestro clima y nuestra sangre bravía precipitan una gran cantidad sobre el coto de caza para prestar el servicio público de encabezar la caza del zorro, con beneficio para sus constituciones. De ahí proviene una raza tan varonil como útil de pequeños príncipes y Willoughby era tan varonil como cualquiera. Se había cultivado y era insuperable en logros populares. Si la pauta del gusto público hubiera sido la filosofía y el entusiasmo nacional se hubiera centrado en los filósofos, al menos habría trabajado con los libros. Trabajó en la ciencia y tenía un laboratorio. Su admirable pasión por destacar, sin embargo, se dirigió durante su juventud, sobre todo, al deporte y tan grande era su pasión que la presencia de rivales solía llevarlo a la declaración de amor.

Sin embargo, sabía que era el más constante de los hombres en su dedicación al sexo. No había desalentado la devoción que Leticia Dale sentía por él e incluso cuando siguió la marea absorbente de la hermosa Constanza Durham (a quien la señora Mountstuart llamaba «el velero de competición») pensaba en Leticia y la contemplaba. Era una violeta tímida.

El comportamiento de Willoughby mientras la lluvia de adulaciones lo empapaba podía compararse a la compostura de los dioses indios sometidos a la adoración, pero a diferencia de ellos no descansaba en un asiento tan amplio que lo preservara de una traición de intoxicación; tenía que seguir tropezando, bailando, equilibrándose con precisión, ladeando la cabeza a derecha e izquierda, dirigiéndose a sus idólatras con frases perfectamente escogidas. Esto solo quiere decir que es más fácil ser un ídolo de madera que de carne, pero Willoughby estaba a la altura de su cometido. La educación del pequeño príncipe le enseña que es distinto a nosotros y, en virtud de la instrucción que recibe y de algo más, que no sabemos qué es, en su interior,

es capaz de mantener su postura cuando nosotros nos tambaleamos. Los pilluelos sobre cuyas coronillas rizadas grises ancianos depositan sus manos con elogios convencionales parecen más viejos de lo que son en realidad y Willoughby parecía más viejo que los años que tenía, no por falta de frescura, sino porque sentía que tenía que ser eminente y plantarse correctamente.

Al oír la palabra de la señora Mountstuart sobre él, sonrió y dijo: «Está a su servicio».

Le comunicaron a la dama la réplica y ella se propuso añadir una tira dedicatoria de seda. Se encontraron y se produjo una conversación llena de ingenio, apropiada a la atmósfera eléctrica de la sala de baile de camino al mágico cenador. Willoughby llevó a la señora Mountstuart a la mesa.

—Si fuera —dijo ella— veinte años más joven, creo que me casaría con usted para curar mi infatuación.

—Entonces déjeme decirle por anticipado, madam —dijo él—, que haría cualquier cosa para obtener un nuevo arrendamiento de su infatuación, salvo divorciarme.

Eran infinitamente más ingeniosos, pero se ha oído mucho y podría contarse.

—¡Hace que la tarea de escoger una esposa para él sea sobrehumanamente difícil! —observó la señora Mountstuart tras escuchar las alabanzas que había dejado que se reprodujeran cuando las damas se separaron de nosotros, en la sala india de lady Patterne, y pudieron conversar sin trabas sobre sus propios temas etéreos.

—Willoughby escogerá una esposa por sí mismo —dijo su madre.

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18 Nombres de cortesanos de los Estuardo. La corte del último Estuardo se hizo famosa por su libertinaje.

19 Willoughby había llegado a la mayoría de edad, entonces a los veintiún años. Sobre las connotaciones de la frase de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, véanse V. S. Pritchett, *George Meredith and the English Comedy,* Londres, Chatto & Windus, 1970, págs. 48-49, y Leslie Dunkling, *When Romeo Met Juliet,* Victoria, Trafford Publishing, 2005, pág. 124.

III

Constanza Durham

La gran cuestión del condado se discutió en muchas casas, pobladas de hijas o sin hijas, mucho después del memorable día de la mayoría de edad de Willoughby. Lady Busshe estaba del lado de Constanza Durham. Se rio de la noción que la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson se había hecho de Leticia Dale. Era algo más vieja que la señora Mountstuart y había conocido al padre de Willoughby, cuyo matrimonio con la rama más rica de la familia Whitford había sido estrictamente sagaz. «Los Patterne se casan con el dinero: no son gente romántica», dijo. La señorita Durham tenía dinero y tenía salud y belleza: tres poderosas cualificaciones para una prometida de los Patterne. Su padre, sir John Durham, era un gran hacendado en la división occidental del condado; un caballero pomposo, la imagen de un suegro para Willoughby. El padre de la señorita Dale era un maltrecho cirujano del ejército de la India, arrendatario de una de las casitas de campo de sir Willoughby que bordeaban Patterne Park. Su hija carecía de dote y escribía poesía. Su canto de celebración del cumpleaños del joven baronet fue considerado un inteligente atrevimiento, osado como solo nuestras tímidas criaturas pueden ser osadas. Sacó el conejo de su chistera de versos ante la multitud; casi se propuso a su héroe en sus rimas. Era bonita; sus pestañas eran largas y oscuras, sus ojos azul oscuro, con el alma lista para dispararse como un cohete desde ellos a una mirada de Willoughby. Y él miró, desde luego miró, aunque no bailó con ella ni una sola vez aquella noche y bailó repetidamente con la señorita Durham. Dejó a Leticia con Vernon Whitford para el último baile de la noche y podía haberla visto con piedad como una elegante muchacha asociada a semejante pareja. El «Febo Apolo convertido en fraile abstinente» había olvidado por completo sus dones musicales en movimiento. Se cruzó consigo mismo y se cruzó con su perpleja dama y se cruzó con todos en la figura de baile, provocando gritos de risa cordial en su primo Willoughby. Dicho sea que eran las cuatro de la madrugada, cuando los que bailan se ríen de cualquiera aunque solo sea para refrescarse los pies y el ingenio de la hora no escatima la carcajada. Vernon se parecía a Teseo en el laberinto, completamente dependiente de su Ariadna; a una mosca liberada de un tarro de mermelada, a un «salvaje» u hombre de los bosques atrapado en una red de ninfas y obligado a seguir el ritmo. Willoughby era inagotable en los felices símiles que vertía sobre la señorita Durham siguiendo las líneas de sir Roger de Coverley y que no serían olvidados, procurándole una reputación de conversador jovial [20] . Corrió el rumor de que le había dado a Leticia a Vernon para bien cuando pudo decidir quedarse con la señorita Durham; su generosidad era famosa; pero esa decisión, aunque la soga tuviera la forma de nudo, parecía reluctante para el tirón final. Prefería la flojedad y, si cortejaba a Leticia en aras de su primo, había que suponer que su amor familiar era mayor que su pasión. Era lo suficientemente generoso para ello o para casarse con la muchacha sin dote él mismo.

Circulaba la historia de una joven y rutilante viuda de nuestra aristocracia que casi lo había atrapado. ¿Por qué oponerse a casarse con alguien de nuestra aristocracia?, le pregunto la señora Mountstuart y él replicó que las muchachas de esa clase no tienen dinero y que dudaba de la calidad de su sangre. Tenía los ojos abiertos. El deber con su Casa era un pensamiento predominante para él y por esa razón podía haberse mostrado más ansioso de darle a Vernon la esbelta y no robusta Leticia que de acceder a su inclinación personal. La mención de la viuda lo ofendió singularmente, a pesar de la categoría de la dama mencionada. «¿Una viuda?», dijo. «¡Yo!» Se dirigía a una viuda, vieja, desde luego, pero su ira ante la sugerencia de su unión con una viuda lo llevó a olvidarse por un momento de las menores sombras del buen gusto. Deseaba que la señora Mountstuart contradijera la historia en términos favorables. Repitió su deseo; era urgente la contradicción y dijo de nuevo: «¡Una viuda!», enderezando toda su figura hasta la perpendicularidad de la letra I [21] . Era una viuda que no había vuelto a casarse y se sabía que las mujeres resueltas que conservan el nombre de su primer marido o no obstaculizan su título con un nuevo caballerete pegado a sus faldas pueden aprobar parcialmente las objeciones señaladas por sir Willoughby. Piensan en sí mismas cuando lo hacen y rara vez dicen «Podría haberme casado»; rara vez se confiesan que, con su permiso, podría haber sucedido. Pueden hacerse una idea de la perspectiva que tiene el caballero del capuchón de la viuda. Pero una amabilidad que podía ser agudamente vulnerada por el simple rumor de su adhesión a la joven reliquia de un conde era desconcertante. Sir Willoughby enderezado. Su letra militar cobró un cuidadoso aspecto mientras se demoraba ociosa y orgullosamente a sus anchas en su lente mental, cubierta de una guirnalda sin sentido como insinuó, con una generosa lasitud, solo para mostrar el origen del rumor y la excelente base que tenía para no darle crédito. Lo habían reprendido. La señora Mountstuart le dio una lección. Sin embargo,

era capaz de contradecir el cuento de la joven condesa. «No hay miedo de que se case con ella, queridos míos».

Mientras tanto había miedo de que perdiera su oportunidad de casarse con la hermosa señorita Durham.

Los dilemas de los pequeños príncipes suelen ser serios. Deberían consistir, ahora y entonces, en un ejemplo para los pobres plebeyos afanosos de los dardos y flechas que asolan la fortuna de los más favorecidos para que predicáramos el contento al desgraciado que no puede armarse de valor para casarse con una mujer o lo ha hecho y recorre las calles arrastrando su carga, para mantener a la dama y la tropa de hijos dolorosamente rezagados para cubrir estaciones subordinadas. Según nuestra lectura, una moraleja es siempre bienvenida en un país moral, especialmente cuando la necia envidia ha de ser corregida con ella, rechazado el inquieto anhelo de cambio. El joven sir Willoughby persistía en su dilema: tenía una dama en cada mano; las únicas dos que, al margen de conquistas metropolitanas que no debían contarse, le habían afectado. Sensible a la belleza, nunca había visto una muchacha tan hermosa como Constanza Durham. Igualmente sensible a la admiración de sí mismo, consideraba a Leticia Dale un parangón de inteligencia. Dudaba entre la rosa regia y la modesta violeta. Se inclinaba ante una; la otra se inclinaba ante él. No podía tener a las dos; es la ley que rige tanto para príncipes como para mendigos. Pero ¿a cuál renunciaba? Su creciente familiaridad con el mundo le había enseñado a poner un precio al alza a los sentimientos de la señorita Dale. Sin embargo, la belleza de Constanza era de las que aleja pesarosos a los contempladores. Tenía la gloria del velero de competición que navega con el viento a favor y no lo cortejaba para ganarlo; huía. En su hora más reflexiva, el atractivo de la dama que sostenía el espejo ante sus rasgos era supremo. Pero tenía arranques apasionados cuando el magnetismo de la viajera lo arrastraba en su estela. A la complejidad se añadía que amaba su libertad; era principescamente libre; tenía más súbditos, más esclavos; gobernaba arrogantemente en el mundo de las mujeres; era más él mismo. Sus experiencias metropolitanas no respondían a su gusto por la cuestión en particular: ¿nos atamos a la mujer que nos idolatra haciendo de ella una esposa?

En medio de sus deliberaciones, un informe del cálido propósito de la señorita Durham, que casualmente le mencionó lady Busshe, llevó a una inmediata proposición de sir Willoughby. Ella lo aceptó y se comprometieron. Ella había sido mordisqueada, pero no comida, mientras él se mostraba dubitativo y, aunque esa era la causa de que la hubiera conquistado, la amabilidad de Willoughby se mostró ofendida. Ella no había llegado a él con una pureza claustral ni salido de una radiante perfección. Del mismo modo, espiritualmente, él era un pequeño príncipe, un príncipe despótico. Deseaba que ella hubiera llegado hasta él como salida de un cascarón, de algún modo más sorprendida de las cosas que un polluelo, pero completamente encerrada antes de que él lo rompiera y lo viera, con los ojos de su sexo, como el primero de todos los hombres. Ella hablaba con franqueza de sus primos y amigos, jóvenes varones. Podría haber replicado a su amargo deseo: «¿Me has pedido en la noche de tu vigesimoprimer cumpleaños, Willoughby?» Desde entonces ella había estado en el polvo del mundo y él concibió su peculiar antipatía, destinada a resultarle fatal, desde las primeras horas de su compromiso. Willoughby era singularmente incapaz de mostrarse celoso de los individuos. Un joven capitán Oxford se había destacado del enjambre que perseguía a Constanza. Willoughby pensaba tan poco en el capitán Oxford como en Vernon Whitford. Su enemigo era el mundo, la masa, que nos confunde en un montón, que ha respirado sobre aquella que hemos elegido, a quien no podemos, nunca, librar de su contacto con la abominable muchedumbre. El placer del mundo es tumbar nuestra marcial letra I, invadir nuestra identidad, desolar nuestra amabilidad. Empezar a pensar es el inicio del disgusto del mundo.

Tan pronto como se publicó el compromiso, todo el condado dijo que Leticia no había tenido una oportunidad y la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson señaló humildemente, en actitud contrita: «No soy una bruja». Lady Busshe podía pretender serlo; había predicho el acontecimiento. Leticia era de la misma opinión que el condado. Tenía amplias miras, pero sin esperanzas. Había elevado la vista a lo más brillante y, como él era lo más elevado, ¿cómo habría podido tener esperanzas? Leticia era la compañera solitaria de un padre enfermo, cuyo inveterado pronóstico sobre ella, que viviría para gobernar Patterne Hall, había torturado a la pobre muchacha en la misma proporción en que él parecía obtener consuelo de ello. El ruido del compromiso solo lo acalló; los reclusos inválidos se aferran obstinadamente a sus ideas. Había observado a sir Willoughby en compañía de su hija cuando el joven baronet revivió a una vivaz juventud de inmediato. De hecho, como niño grande y niña pequeña, habían jugado juntos hacía mucho. Willoughby había sido un muchacho encantadoramente hermoso. Su retrato en la casa, con sombrero, apoyado en su poni, con las piernas cruzadas y largos rizos rubios sobre sus hombros, era la imagen del ángel más presente en el alma de ella y, como hombre, había —aunque ella no suponía que fuera intencionado— sometido su naturaleza para que se inclinara ante él; tan sumisa era ella que su felicidad era más plena si pensaba bien de él en todas sus acciones que si imaginaba que las circunstancias eran distintas. Eso podía parecerse al éxtasis de los devotos del Juggernaut. Es una forma de la pasión inspirada por los pequeños príncipes y no es preciso que nos ma-

ravillemos de que un sexo conservador ayude a mantenerlos en sus elevadas posiciones. ¿Podía verse de otro modo? No tendríamos balizas si se nivelaran a ras de tierra y vale la pena que una mujer arda aquí y allá para preservar la adoración general de las mujeres a un joven ideal. Nosotros les pedimos pureza. Ellas pueden en justicia reclamar atención. No la encontrarán más brillante que en el comportamiento universal de sus hermanas con un pequeño príncipe de virtudes ostensibles que puede practicar sin perjudicarse por resultar invisible. Que las razas de los hombres se sorprendan de sus dioses, si quieren. Mientras tanto harían mejor en seguir adorándolos.

Leticia siguió. Vio a la señorita Durham en Patterne Hall en varias ocasiones. Admiró a la pareja. Deseaba presenciar la ceremonia nupcial. Esperaba el día con esa mezcla de disposición y reserva que tenemos al acercarnos al final desencantador de un romance encantador, cuando sir Willoughby la encontró un domingo por la mañana mientras ella cruzaba solitariamente su parque de camino a la iglesia. Quedaban diez días para la ceremonia. Él tendría que estar lejos, en el otro extremo del condado de la señorita Durham. Leticia sabía que había cabalgado hasta allí el día anterior, pero aquí estaba y, de una manera insólita, bastante sorprendente, le ofreció el brazo para llevar a Leticia a la puerta de la iglesia y habló y se rio de un modo que le recordó a un caballero de caza que había visto una vez ponerse de pie tambaleando tras una fea caída en uno de los setos durante uno de sus paseos invernales: «¡Todo está bien, todo en su sitio, nunca he estado mejor, solo un rasguño!», había dicho el caballero, mientras se sujetaba y oprimía la cabeza llena de sangre. Sir Willoughby parloteó de su felicidad al encontrarla. «Realmente soy muy afortunado», dijo, y dijo eso y otras cosas una y otra vez, sin dejar de hablar, contando anécdotas del condado y riéndose con toda la boca. Siguió hablando en el pórtico de la iglesia y murmuró suavemente al entrar en el pasillo, pasando junto a los bancos de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson y lady Busshe. Por supuesto era entretenido, pero ¡qué extraño le resultaba a Leticia! La mitad del rostro de Willoughby quedaba oculta tras un antiguo bonete. Se acercó mucho al de ella y el escrutinio al que la sometió fue de lo más solícito.

Tras el servicio, Willoughby evitó a las grandes damas alejándose una o dos yardas de donde Leticia se sentaba; ansiaba su mano en su brazo mientras la llevaba por la entrada del parque a la iglesia, inclinándose continuamente hacia ella, hablando con rapidez, en apariencia interesado por completo en sus tranquilas réplicas, con asomos de concentración en los que se quedaba absorto en una profunda abstracción. Ella aventuró las réplicas más breves por temor a no haberlo entendido.

Hizo una pregunta:

—Supongo que la señorita Durham está bien.

Y él contestó:

—¿Durham? —y dijo—: No conozco a ninguna señorita Durham.

La impresión que le dejó fue que podría haber tenido un accidente el día anterior durante su paseo a caballo y haberse golpeado en la cabeza.

Lo habría preguntado si no supiera que era un inglés de los pies a la cabeza en su disgusto por pensar que los accidentes podían lastimarlo incluso cuando eso fuera lo ocurrido.

La visitó al día siguiente para llevarla de paseo. Le aseguró que ella lo había prometido y apeló a su padre, que no podía testificar sobre una promesa que no había oído, pero que le pidió que le concediera su paseo. Así que una vez más estaba en el parque con sir Willoughby, escuchando sus raptos de los viejos días. Una palabra de asentimiento de ella le bastó. «Ahora soy yo mismo», fue una de las observaciones que repitió ese día. Ella se extendió en la belleza del parque y de la casa para agradecérselo.

Él no habló de la señorita Durham y Leticia temió mencionar su nombre.

Al despedirse, Willoughby prometió a Leticia que la visitaría por la mañana. No acudió y ella habría podido excusarlo tras oír el cuento.

Era un cuento lamentable. Había cabalgado hasta la mansión de sir John Durham, a treinta millas de distancia, para oír, a su llegada, que Constanza se había marchado de la casa de su padre dos días antes para visitar a una tía en Londres y enviado una nota en la que indicaba que era la esposa del capitán Oxford, húsar y compañero de uno de sus hermanos. Una carta de la prometida esperaba a Willoughby en la casa solariega. Había cabalgado de noche sin preocuparse por su caballo para llegar rápidamente a su hogar, completamente olvidado de sí mismo tras el terrible golpe. Fue la noche del sábado. Al día siguiente, domingo, encontró a Leticia en su parque, la llevó a la iglesia, la dejó allí y al día siguiente, antes de su desaparición durante algunas semanas, caminó con ella a la vista de todos los carruajes a lo largo del camino.

Ya vemos que la señorita Durham lo había liberado muy afortunadamente, aunque no de una manera considerada. Hombre de honor, no había podido tomar la iniciativa, pero el frenesí de una muchacha celosa había podido urgirla a emprender esa acción y lo poco que él había sufrido se había mostrado al mundo. La señorita Durham, seguía la historia, había sido escogida por la madre de Willoughby para él, contra las inclinaciones de su corazón, que habían acabado por someter a lady Patterne. En consecuencia, ya no había obstáculos entre sir Willoughby y la señorita Dale. Era una historia agradable y romántica y dispuso a mucha

gente a favor de la preferida del condado, como la opción de una muchacha sin dote ni posición no habría logrado sin el asombro por la conducta de la señorita Durham y el deseo de sentir que un caballero tan destacado no fuera en modo alguno digno de lástima. A Constanza la llamaron «esa loca». Leticia irrumpió con nuevos y abundantes méritos y uno de los principales requisitos en relación con Patterne —una lady Willoughby que entretuviera y animara la tristeza de la casa solariega— se convirtió en certeza cuando se tuvieron en consideración su donosura y viveza e inteligencia señaladas. Fue una visitante asidua de la casa solariega por invitación expresa de lady Patterne y, a veces, en esas ocasiones, Willoughby también estaba allí, vigilando la adecuación de su laboratorio, aunque no estuviera en casa para el condado; aún no se esperaba que lo estuviera. Se dedicaba en cuerpo y alma a la ciencia y no hablaba de otra cosa. Pero las notas generales no podían aplicarse a Leticia, de quien él era el cortés y tranquilo pretendiente que podemos ver cuando un hombre ha roto un enredo infeliz para volver con la dama de sus primeros y más fuertes afectos.

Siguieron algunos meses de cortejo doméstico y luego, habiendo pasado el decente intervalo prescrito por la situación, sir Willoughby Patterne dejó su tierra natal para un viaje por el globo.

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20 Sir Roger de Coverley era un personaje del *Spectator* de Addison que dio nombre a una danza.

21 *I,* en inglés, es el pronombre de primera persona «Yo».

IV

Leticia Dale

FUE otra sorpresa para el condado.

No hurgaremos en los sentimientos de las mujeres pacientemente hambrientas: han de lograr el sustento por sí mismas, pues, como podemos observar, viven; evidentemente no necesitan una gran cantidad de alimento y las podemos considerar criaturas que se calientan con una vela de sebo animal. No pueden tener demasiada vitalidad quienes son tan poco exclamatorias. Las personas que tienen la oportunidad del patetismo y desisten de usarlo suscitan un sentimiento correspondiente de paciente compasión, cercano al desprecio. El público estuvo a favor de Leticia durante varias semanas y, si se hubiera decidido a aprovecharlo, habría sido acogida en gratitud por un drama rural. Habría habido un partido en su contra, gente fría, que habría criticado sus pretensiones de ascender de una esfera sin reconocimiento a ser la dueña de Patterne Hall, pero también habría habido un partido contrario a sir Willoughby compuesto por los dos o tres revolucionarios, cansados del yugo, que se encuentran en Inglaterra cuando hay un revuelo, por una gran cantidad de simpatizantes natos, siempre dispuestos a verter una lágrima por la lágrima misma y, aquí y allá, un alma samaritana dispuesta a socorrer a la pobre humanidad afligida. La oportunidad se desvaneció sin drama. La propia Leticia se presentó en la iglesia con un rostro mansamente devoto, de acuerdo con su costumbre, y aceptó invitaciones a la casa solariega, asistió a la lectura de las cartas de Willoughby a su familia y se alimentó de las cáscaras secas de él cuando no se mencionaba su nombre; ni una sola nota de la llamada a la congregación del patetismo hizo enrojecer a esta joven dama.

Así, el favor del público se extinguió muy pronto. Leticia tenía, según la última interpretación de los acontecimientos, un espíritu demasiado pequeño para ser lady Willoughby de Patterne; no podría haber sido una anfitriona adecuada; él se habrá dado cuenta de que la muchacha no estaba a su altura en posición y se ha marchado para vencer lo que queda de una fastidiosa adhesión inicial, que ya no había de turbarlo tanto a juzgar por el tenor de sus cartas: ¡cartas realmente incomparables! Lady Busshe y la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson disfrutaron con su lectura. Sir Willoughby aparecía como un espléndido representante de un joven caballero de la isla en esas cartas a su familia, despachadas desde las principales ciudades de los Estados Unidos de América. Les ofrecía un esbozo de «nuestros democráticos primos», decía. ¡Qué primos! Podrían haber estado todos en los marines. Paseó su estandarte por todo el continente y, simplemente dejando constancia de los hechos, suscitaba una idea de los resultados de la medición a su familia y amigos en casa. Era un experto en la ironía de la agrupación incongruente. La naturaleza de la igualdad bajo las barras y estrellas se presentaba de la siguiente manera. ¡Igualdad! Las reflexiones eran circunstanciales: «Estos primos nuestros son extremadamente divertidos. Me encuentro entre los descendientes de los cabezas peladas [22] . Aquí y allá, una alusión a las viejas diferencias domésticas con un perfecto buen humor. Nosotros seguimos nuestro camino; ellos el suyo, en apariencia creyendo que el republicanismo obra cambios admirables en la naturaleza humana. Vernon se esfuerza en creer que lo hace. Los diez supremos de nuestros vecinos son la Infernal de París. El resto es la Inglaterra radical, hasta donde estoy familiarizado con esa sección de mi país». Si comparamos, son absurdos; si contrastamos, monstruosos. El contraste de las cartas de Vernon con las de Willoughby era igual de extremado. Apenas podríamos considerarlas de parientes que viajan juntos ni de Vernon Whitford como de alguien nacido y criado en Inglaterra. Las mismas escenas descritas por las dos plumas podrían haberse esbozado en hemisferios distintos. Vernon carecía de ironía. Carecía del poder creativo del epistolario de Willoughby que obligaba a exclamar a su familia y amigos: «¡Cuánto se le parece!», y los conjuraba a través del ancho Atlántico a contemplarlo y aplaudir su señorío.

Lo veían con claridad, con ojos abiertos: una palabra, un giro de la pluma o una palabra no dicha ofrecían una imagen suya en América, Japón, China, Australia, el continente europeo, que sostenía una revista inglesa de lo grotesco de su hacedor. Vernon parecía una oveja, sin estatura suficiente, alegre por un cumplido, agradecido por la cena, tristemente dispuesto a digerir todo cuanto veía y oía. Pero uno era un Patterne, el otro un Whitford. Uno tenía genio, el otro pasaba el tiempo tras él con el título de estudiante. Uno era el caballero inglés, dondequiera que fuera; el otro era de una nueva clase, no descrita, producida tardíamente en Inglaterra, que no era probable que aportara demasiado para sí mismo ni demasiado para el país.

Willoughby describió con mayúsculas el baile de Vernon en América. «¡Adiós a nuestros primos!», escribió en su viaje a Japón. «Posiblemente haya estado en boga en sus salones de baile y al mostrarles cómo monta a caballo un inglés: debo resignarme si no he sido popular entre ellos. No puedo cantar su himno na-

cional —si un amontonamiento de estados es una nación— y debo confesar que he escuchado con frígida cortesía cuando lo cantaban. Un gran pueblo, sin duda. Les digo adiós. He tenido que separarme de Vernon. Ha pensado seriamente en asentarse, en medios de corresponderse con algunos de ellos». En conjunto, olvidando uno o dos «gestos de insolencia» por parte de sus anfitriones, que mencionaba, Willoughby salió bastante airoso. El presidente había sido, conscientemente o no, descortés, ¡pero nadie conocía su origen! De esas interjecciones, mansos movimientos de la cola de león dirigidos a Bretaña Gobernadora, que esperaba de él, de alguna suave manera, que agitara la *terga cauda* al retirarse, sir Willoughby Patterne abandonó una tierra de costumbres extrañas y, siempre que volvía a hablar de América, lo hacía respetuosa y ponderadamente, con el rabo entre piernas, por decirlo así. Sus viajes le fueron provechosos. El hecho es que hay primos que alcanzan la grandeza y han de ser pacificados o se mostrarán enojosos. ¡El cielo impida una colisión entre primos!

Willoughby volvió a su Inglaterra tras una ausencia de tres años. Una hermosa mañana de abril, la última del mes, cabalgó a lo largo de las empalizadas del parque y, por la fortuna de las cosas, Leticia fue la primera persona a la que se encontró. Atravesaba los campos con un grupo de escolares que recogían flores para el primero de mayo. Desmontó y le dio la mano. «¡Leticia Dale!», dijo. Tomó aliento. «¡Su nombre es dulce música inglesa! ¿Se encuentra bien?». La ansiosa pregunta le permitió leer profundamente en sus ojos. Encontró allí al hombre que buscaba, lo exprimió apasionadamente y la dejó ir, diciendo:

—No podría haber pedido en mis oraciones una escena doméstica más encantadora para darme la bienvenida que verla a usted y a esos niños recogiendo flores. No creo en el azar. Estaba decretado que nos encontráramos. ¿No lo cree?

Leticia suspiró lánguidamente de alegría.

Willoughby le pidió que repartiera una moneda de oro entre los pequeños; le preguntó el nombre de algunos y repitió: «Mary, Susan, Charlotte, ¡solo los nombres cristianos, por favor! Bien, queridos, mañana por la mañana traeréis vuestras guirnaldas a la casa y ¡recordad, temprano! Que no se os peguen las sábanas mañana. Supongo que estoy moreno, ¿no es así, Leticia?». Sonrió para disculparse por el sol extranjero y murmuró en un rapto: «El verde de este país inglés es insuperable. Deja Inglaterra y hornéate para apreciarlo. No podrá, a menos que saboree el exilio como yo lo he hecho. ¿Cuántos años? ¿Cuántos?».

—Tres —dijo Leticia.

—¡Treinta! —dijo él—. Me parece que han sido esos. Al menos, me siento inmensamente más viejo. Pero al mirarla podría pensar que han sido menos de tres. No ha cambiado. No ha cambiado en absoluto. Me aferro a esa esperanza. La veré pronto. Tengo mucho de lo que hablar, mucho que contarle. Visitaré enseguida a su padre. Tengo que hablar especialmente con él. Yo... ¡qué felicidad, Leticia! Pero no debo olvidar que tengo una madre. Adiós, ¡por unas horas, no muchas!

Volvió a apretarle la mano. Se fue.

Leticia envió a los niños a sus casas. Recoger prímulas era un duro trabajo ahora, un asunto polvoriento. Podría desear que su planeta no hubiera descendido a la tierra de tanto como la había agitado su presencia, pero su entusiasta patriotismo era como una lluvia que, en la primavera del año, viene del este y se mezcla con el aire, sacando nuevos colores y haciendo que la vida fluya, y sus pensamientos se volvieron con asombro a la conducta de Constanza Durham. Esa era la manera que tenía Leticia de hacer frente una vez más a su debilidad. Casi habría podido denigrar a la mujer que había causado pesar a ese mago benéfico, a ese exiliado patético, de rostro aristocráticamente curtido por el sol y ojos profundamente escrutadores. ¡A cuánta profundidad podían llegar sus ojos! La famélica paciencia suscitó la idea de un festín. La sensación de hambre la acompañó, y la esperanza, y la paciencia huyó. Habría rechazado la esperanza para conservar la paciencia, pero ¡no iba a ser siempre invierno!, le dijo su sangre razonadora, y habremos de excusarla cuanto nos sea posible si su restaurada calidez le aseguraba que Willoughby venía para revolver las estaciones y poner fin a un largo invierno. Tenía que hablar especialmente con su padre, había dicho. ¿Qué significaba eso? Pero ¡qué! No se atrevía a decirlo ni a imaginarlo.

En el siguiente encuentro fue «señorita Dale».

Una semana después se encerró con su padre.

El señor Dale, en la víspera de ese día señalado, elogió a sir Willoughby como hacendado. Una nueva licencia de la casa de campo iba a serle concedida en los viejos términos, dijo. Salvo que sir Willoughby lo había felicitado por tener una hija excelente, su entrevista fue la de un terrateniente y su arrendatario, al parecer, y Leticia dijo: «¿Así que no tendremos que abandonar la casa?», con un tono de satisfacción, mientras le torcía el cuello a la joven esperanza en su pecho. Por la noche su diario recogió esta línea: «En este día he sido una loca. ¿Mañana?».

Mañana y muchos días después hubo rayas en lugar de palabras.

La paciencia volvió a ella malhumoradamente. Igual que hemos de tener algún tipo de alimento, y ella no tenía nada más, la tomó y la encontró más seca que antes. Es una dieta compuesta, pero escasa. Los

muertos son pacientes y nos parecemos a ellos al alimentarnos durante mucho tiempo sin interrupción. Sus mejillas hundidas con la hoja caída en ellas la acusaban de justificar a su ídolo por no condescender con alguien como ella. Lo vio en la casa solariega. Él no advirtió ningún cambio. Fue extremadamente amable y cortés. Más de una vez descubrió sus ojos puestos en ella y, entonces, él desviaba apresuradamente la mirada hacia su madre y Leticia tenía que cerrar el paso al pensamiento para que el pensamiento no fuera un pecado y la esperanza un espectro culpable. Pero ¿se había opuesto a ella su madre? No podía evitar preguntárselo. Su viaje por el globo había sido deseo de su madre; era una mujer ambiciosa con mala salud y deseaba que él se quedara a vivir con ella en Patterne, aunque parecía estar conforme con que residiera sensatamente en Londres.

Un día sir Willoughby, a la manera tranquila que lo caracterizaba, le informó de que se había convertido en un caballero rural: había dejado Londres, aborrecido como la sepultura del individuo. Quería establecerse en sus posesiones y que su primo Vernon Whitford le ayudara a administrarlas, dijo, y fue muy divertida su descripción de los intentos de su primo por vivir de la literatura, y añadió lo suficiente a sus ingresos de mendigo para que pasara sus dos meses habituales al año en los Alpes. Antes de su gran viaje, Willoughby se había burlado del juicio de Vernon; no era del todo desconocido que Vernon había ofendido el orgullo de su familia con algún acto extravagante. Pero a su vuelta reconoció el talento de Vernon y parecía incapaz de arreglárselas sin él.

La nueva disposición le proporcionó a Leticia una compañía para sus paseos. Pasear le resultaba amargo a Willoughby, cuya exclamación de la palabra indicaba su voluntad de cualquier tipo de ejercicio a caballo; pero ella no tenía caballo y así, mientras él cazaba, Leticia y Vernon caminaban y la vecindad especulaba con las circunstancias, hasta que Eleanor e Isabel Patterne la introdujeron aún más en los paseos en calesa y observaban a sir Willoughby cabalgar junto a ellas.

Leticia sintió un placer real y soleado cuando el joven Crossjay Patterne se estableció bajo su techo; el hijo del teniente, ahora capitán, de marines, un muchacho de doce años con todo el vigor de los muchachos de doce años, cuyo alojamiento había dispuesto Vernon de acuerdo con su padre. Vernon era uno de esos hombres que no se ocupan de su dinero, no tienen gastos que pagar de su propiedad y son renuentes a gastar. Había oído hablar de la gran familia del capitán Patterne y se propuso tener a su hijo mayor en la casa para enseñarle, pero Willoughby declinó albergar al hijo de un padre semejante, prediciendo que el pelo del muchacho sería rojo, su piel eruptiva y sus prácticas detestables. Así que Vernon, tras obtener el consentimiento del señor Dale para acomodar al joven, se dirigió a Davenport y se trajo consigo a un muchacho sonrosado y relleno, que caía sobre la comida y los pudines y los devoraba con una sencillez cautivadora al confesar que nunca había tenido suficiente para comer en su vida. Hubo que adiestrarlo para una mesa abundante. Al principio, con ayuda, el joven Crossjay se sentaba y suspiraba pesadamente, contemplando el plato sin acabar. Luego le contó a su anfitrión y a su anfitriona que tenía dos hermanas mayores y tres hermanos y dos hermanas más jóvenes: «¡Todos hambrientos!», dijo el muchacho.

Su patetismo resultaba cómico. Pasó todo un mes antes de que pudiera ver cómo retiraban el pudín de la mesa sin un suspiro de pena por no haber dado cuenta de él como delegado de la casa de Devonport. Las bromas del pequeño compañero y su disfrute de la vida rural, cenagosa y salvaje divertían a Leticia de la mañana a la noche. Cuando lo pillaba por la mañana procuraba enseñarle; Vernon, favorecido por la caza, lo hacía por la tarde. El joven Crossjay habría revitalizado cualquier casa. No solo era indolente, sino que se oponía a adquirir conocimiento por medio de libros diciendo: «Pero ¡no quiero!», en un tono que habría hecho pensar a un lógico. La naturaleza era muy robusta en él. A la vuelta de cada hora de instrucción había que arrancarlo de la tierra, clasificarlo como a una raíz, por el ejercicio de su cabezota en aquellos enigmas tiránicos. Pero pronto aprendió, por su gran naturaleza, los hábitos de los pájaros, el lugar donde ponían sus huevos, la conducta de los conejos y el cosquilleo de los peces y la caza furtiva con los combativos muchachos del distrito y cómo adular a la cocinera durante todo un día de lluvia. Su pasión por nuestro servicio naval era un medio de forzar su atención a las lecciones una vez empezó a comprender que había que atravesar el desierto para obtener el rango de guardiamarina. Se jactaba con ardor de su valeroso padre y, encontrándose cerca de la casa solariega mientras hablaba con Vernon y Leticia de su padre, planteó una cuestión que le preocupaba y la expuso con estas palabras: «¡Mi padre es el que condujo el ejército!», hizo una pausa: «Digo, señor Whitford, que si sir Willoughby es pariente mío y me da piezas de una corona, ¿por qué no quiere ver a mi padre y mi padre caminó durante diez millas bajo la lluvia para verlo y tuvo que caminar diez millas de vuelta y dormir en una posada?».

La única respuesta que podía darse es que sir Willoughby no estaba en casa. «¡Oh mi padre lo vio y sir Willoughby dijo que no estaba en casa!», replicó el muchacho, produciendo un extraño sonsonete en el oído al repetir «no estaba en casa» con la misma voz como disculpa, completamente inocente de la malicia. Vernon le dijo a Leticia, sin embargo, que el muchacho no había pedido una explicación de sir Willoughby.

A diferencia del caballo del adagio, era más fácil obligar al joven Crossjay a beber las aguas de la ins-

trucción que llevarlo hasta el borde. Su corazón no era tan antagonista como su naturaleza y, por grados, mediante una mezcla adecuada de disciplina y engatusamiento, se empapó. Silbaba en la ventana de la cocinera después de un día de novillos, en una noche de abril, contando aventuras mientras cenaba. Leticia entró en la cocina con un índice reprobatorio. Crossjay se lanzó a besarla y siguió parloteando de un lugar a quince millas de distancia donde había visto a sir Willoughby cabalgando junto a una joven. La imposibilidad de que el muchacho hubiese llegado tan lejos a pie hizo dudar a Leticia de su veracidad, hasta que oyó que un caballero lo había recogido por el camino en una calesa y lo había llevado a una granja para enseñarle una puesta de huevos y pájaros disecados de todas las clases inglesas: martín pescador, carpinteros verde y negro, búhos con más boca que cabeza y alas polvorientas y moteadas como mariposas... Todo muy circunstancial. Sin embargo, a pesar de tomar el té en la granja y volver a casa en tren a expensas del caballero, el cuento le pareció ficticio a Leticia hasta que Crossjay le relató que se había parado a saludar en el camino del ferrocarril y se había descubierto ante sir Willoughby y que sir Willoughby había pasado sin reparar en él, aunque la joven lo hizo y volvió la cabeza y asintió. La imagen tenía un tinte de verdad.

Extraño eclipse, cuando un tinte de verdad ensombrece nuestro brillante planeta ideal. No parece que sea culpa del planeta, sino de la verdad. La realidad ofende; un engaño nuestro tesoro, del que hemos sido despojados. Entonces empieza para nosotros el tiempo del engaño voluntario y su necesario acompañamiento del disgusto por la realidad, que agota el corazón mucho más que la paciente resistencia al hambre.

Los indicios se dispersaron por la vecindad; los setos trinaban, las copas de los árboles graznaban. La señora Mountstuart Jenkinson fue clara al respecto:

—Patterne tiene una dama al final, ¿no es así? Pero nunca dudamos de su matrimonio; debe casarse y, puesto que no se ha casado con una extranjera, no tenemos de qué quejarnos. La conoció en Cherriton. Ambos quedaron prendados a la vez. He oído que su padre es una especie de hombre instruido, sin tierras. Creo que tampoco tiene casa. Es gente que pasa la mitad del tiempo en el continente. Van a pasar un año en Upton Park. La muchacha apropiada con la que establecerse y entretenerse si ella piensa en establecerse. Dieciocho, perfectos modales, no hace falta que preguntéis si es una belleza. Sir Willoughby tendrá lo debido. Tendremos que enseñarle a corregirlo, pero ¡no escuchéis a lady Busshe! Él era demasiado joven a los veintitrés o veinticuatro. A ningún joven lo dejan plantado; le está permitido escapar. Un joven casado es un tragasables obligado a mantener la paz. Le preocupaba mantenerla. A los treinta o treinta y uno está maduro para mandar porque sabe cómo doblegarse. Sir Willoughby es una espléndida criatura a la que solo le falta una esposa que lo complete. Para un hombre como ese no es apropiado ir siempre corriendo. Definitivamente ¡no! Pronto sería ridículo. No ha nacido peor que otros hombres, probablemente mejor, infinitamente más excusable; pero ahora lo tenemos y ya era hora. La veré y la estudiaré, agudamente, podéis estar seguros, aunque me imagino que puedo confiar en su juicio.

Para confirmar el zumbido creciente, el reverendo doctor Middleton y su hija visitaron de paso la casa solariega, donde solo los vieron los miembros de la familia Patterne. El joven Crossjay mantuvo una breve conversación con la señorita Middleton y corrió a la casita de campo lleno de ella: amaba la marina y su rostro era alegre. Tenía una sonrisa de humor muy agradable, según Vernon. La joven le fue descrita a Leticia como alta, elegante, vivaz y la pintaron como si llevara la juventud por bandera. Con su sonrisa de «humor muy agradable» no podía ser sino vencedora.

Vernon habló más de su padre, un erudito de elevada reputación; felizmente, un erudito de fortuna independiente. Su recuerdo más maduro de la señorita Middleton se volvió poético o la describió en una imagen apta para un oído poético: «Da la impresión de Eco. El doctor Middleton tiene una de las mejores cabezas de Inglaterra».

—¿Cuál es su nombre de pila? —dijo Leticia.

Vernon creía que su nombre de pila era Clara.

Leticia se fue a la cama y pasó el día pensando en Eco, el suave espíritu salvaje, de nombre Clara, que había sido enviado volando en amplio semicírculo por la voz que se había levantado para ayudar; más dulce que hermosa, muy por encima de las bellezas de salón como los colores del cielo y si, al mismo tiempo, era elegante y tenía una sonrisa amable, ¿podía un hombre resistirse a ella? Para inspirar el título de Eco en cualquiera, una joven ha de ser singularmente espiritual. Su padre la había dotado, dijo Vernon. ¿Quién no lo haría? Parecía una crueldad adicional que la gracia de un atractivo poético la rondara, pues despojaba a Leticia de una parte de su pequeña fortuna, por mística que fuera. Pero un hombre como sir Willoughby tenía pretensiones poéticas, pues poseía todas las gracias masculinas, y pensar que la señorita Middleton lo hubiera conquistado en virtud de algo innato en ella, por místico que fuera, deparaba a Leticia una vaga sensación de tener algo que ver con la muchacha escogida. «Lo que hay en mí, lo ve en ella». Cubrió su orgullo para pensar así, como una corona funeraria sobre una lápida. Forzó su imaginación a meditar sobre Clara y la invistió deliberadamente de encantos románticos, a pesar del dolor: el zelota ascético se aferra a su parte del cielo —más amarga, más bendita— con su cilicio y su flagelo, y la felicidad de Leticia se cifró en glorifi-

car a Clara. A través de aquella rival escogida, a través de su comprensión del espíritu de la opción de sir Willoughby por alguien como Clara, ella aún estaba ligada a él.

Su estado de ánimo de una fidelidad extática era una exaltación peligrosa: un desierto que distorsiona el cerebro y, en el mundo en el que mora el ídolo, lo expondrá, si se acerca, a su propia prueba de fuego y obtendrá un cerebro claro a costa de un corazón quemado. Leticia frecuentaba la casa solariega, ayudando a cuidar a lady Patterne. Sir Willoughby la había tratado hasta ahora como a una amiga querida e insignificante, a quien no era necesario mencionarle el objeto de sus cabalgadas a Upton Park.

Sin embargo, al contemplar lo que estaba ganando, Willoughby había caído en la ansiedad de lo que podría estar perdiendo. Leticia pertenecía a su brillante juventud; era un hombre que vivía retrospectivamente de una manera casi tan intensa como en el presente y, a pesar del celo digno de alabanza de Leticia en ayudar a su madre, sospechaba cierta infidelidad, difícilmente sin causa: ya no parecía tan pálida, sus ojos no le reprochaban nada, el secreto de los viejos días que habían compartido había estado tan oculto como expuesto. Ella podía haberlo enterrado, a la manera de las mujeres, cuyo pecho puede ser una tumba si nosotros y el mundo dejamos que lo sea; sepulcros absolutos donde yacer muertos, como espectros. Aunque no sea mortal y horrible pensarlo, podemos yacer fríos en algún rincón. Incluso embalsamados es posible que no recibamos visitas. ¿Qué clase de mundo es el que sabe que estamos embalsamados? No estaríamos mejor que un desgraciado que se pudre en un mundo en el que el pecho de una mujer no siente curiosidad por nosotros y contempla las candelas ardientes y una exhibición ocasional de los servicios de culto. Hay mujeres —¡no hablemos de la de Éfeso!— que nos embalsaman y abandonan el mundo dejando la palmatoria encendida, hasta que llega un extraño y ellas, que tenían nuestra imagen delante, avivan de repente las llamas vestales y nos tratan como a polvo para abonar el jardín de su pecho y que aflore de nuevo el amor. Sir Willoughby lo sabía; tenía experiencia de ello en forma de extranjero y conocía los sentimientos del extranjero hacia su predecesor y la dama.

Abordó a Leticia para hablar de sí mismo y de sus planes: el proyecto de una escapada a Italia. ¿Envidiable? Sí, pero en Inglaterra uno vive la vida moral superior. Italia se jacta de la belleza sensual; la espiritual es la nuestra. «Conozco Italia; a menudo he deseado hacer de cicerone allí para usted. Según están las cosas, supongo que estaré con quienes conocen el país tanto como yo y no tendré demasiado entusiasmo... si usted es lo que era». Era culpable de su perpleja indecisión entre una y otra persona en una sola frase más de una vez. Mientras hablaba exclusivamente de sí mismo, parecía mostrarse condescendiente con ella. A veces hablaba principalmente de ella, empezando por el admirable cuidado de su madre, y deseaba presentarle a la señorita Middleton. Quería conocer su opinión de la señorita Middleton, confiaba en su intuición del carácter; nunca la había visto equivocarse.

—Si supusiera que pudiera equivocarse, señorita Dale, no estaría tan seguro de mí mismo. Estoy atado a la buena opinión que tengo de usted, como ve, y usted ha de seguir siendo la misma. ¿Dónde estaría yo, si no?

De este modo se vio llevado a detenerse en la amistad y el encanto de la amistad entre hombres y mujeres, «platonismo», lo llamó.

—Me he reído de eso en el mundo, pero no en lo profundo de mi corazón. La frase amor platónico es bastante ridícula. Usted me ha enseñado que el ideal de la amistad es posible cuando encontramos a dos personas capaces de un afecto desinteresado. El resto de la vida es obligación; obligación con los padres, obligación con el país. Pero la amistad es la fiesta de quienes pueden ser amigos. Las esposas abundan, los amigos son escasos. ¡Yo sé *hasta qué punto* son escasos!

Leticia se tragó lo que pensaba mientras surgía. ¿Por qué la torturaba? ¿Para darse un festín? No podía permitirse perderlo, estaba acostumbrada a ello y soportaba su indiferencia, pero no que él mismo se desfigurara; la empobrecía. Era como si él exigiera un juramento suyo cuando decía: «¡Italia! Pero ¡no veré un día comparable al día de mi vuelta a Inglaterra ni conoceré un placer tan exquisito como la bienvenida que me dio! ¿Será usted fiel a eso? ¿Puedo esperar otro encuentro semejante?».

Él la presionaba para que respondiera. Ella hizo lo que pudo. No lo satisfizo y oírlo apenas tuvo para ella el tono de virilidad que él solía rogarle para reafirmarse; feminizaba su lenguaje. Ella tenía que decir: «Temo que no puedo comprometerme a esa cita, sir Willoughby», antes de que él volviera a estar alerta, lo que hizo, pues era cualquier cosa salvo obtuso, con la réplica: «Cumplirá lo prometido y se mantendrá en su puesto. Como hay accidentes, hemos de dejarlo en manos del destino. Que suceda lo que tenga que suceder. Ya sabe que detesto los cambios. Al menos la tendré a usted como arrendataria y, dondequiera que esté, veré su luz en el extremo de mi parque».

—Ni mi padre ni yo querríamos dejar Ivy Cottage —dijo Leticia.

—Hasta aquí, entonces —murmuró él—. Me informará de todo y habrá de ser con mi consentimiento si piensa en marcharse.

—Casi podría comprometerme a eso —dijo ella.

—¿Ama el lugar?

—Sí, soy la más feliz de las granjeras.

—Creo, señorita Dale, que eso me haría feliz si yo fuera un granjero.

—Ese es el sueño del palacio. Pero, en comparación, serlo, y no desear ser otra cosa, es como dormir sin sobresaltos.

—Describe usted una casita de campo con colores que tientan a escapar de las grandes casas y haciendas.

—Usted volvería a ellas aún más deprisa, sir Willoughby.

—Usted me conoce —dijo él, asintiendo y dejándolo pasar. Se detuvo: «Pero no soy ambicioso».

—Tal vez sea demasiado orgulloso para la ambición, sir Willoughby.

—¡Usted me ata a la vida!

Willoughby sintió una punzada. Clara Middleton no lo había estudiado ni lo conocía como Leticia Dale.

Leticia se quedó pensando que a él le gustaba jugar al ratón y al gato. Ella no lo «ataba a la vida». Se habría sorprendido al darse cuenta de lo sincero que era él.

Cuando volvió a sentarse junto al lecho de lady Patterne tuvo una intuición considerable que habría podido ayudarla a sondearlo si se hubiera limitado a sus sentimientos. La vieja dama se mostró afectuosamente confidencial al hablar de su único tema, su hijo. «Otra elegante muchacha, querida. Tiene salud y dinero y belleza, y él también, y parece una unión afortunada; espero que lo sea y rezo para ello, pero empezamos a leer el mundo cuando nuestros ojos se debilitan, porque leemos solo las líneas y me pregunto si el dinero y la salud y la belleza por ambas partes no habrán sido la mutua atracción. Ya lo intentamos y aquella muchacha, Durham, era honesta, comoquiera que la hayamos llamado. Deseaba una compañera apreciativa, atenta, para él, una mujer inteligente, con otra clase de riqueza y de belleza. Era honesta, se fue a tiempo; había algo peor que eso. Ahora tenemos el mismo capítulo y la misma clase de persona, que tal vez no sea tan honesta, y no veré el final de todo esto. Prométeme que siempre serás buena con él; sé la amiga de mi hijo, su Egeria, te llama. Sé lo que fuiste para él cuando aquella muchacha le rompió el corazón y nadie, ni siquiera su madre, pudo ver que sufría. Consuélalo en su sensibilidad. Willoughby ha puesto toda su fe en ti. Me estremece pensar que se destruyera. Dice que eres, lo ha dicho con frecuencia, su imagen de la mujer constante...».

Leticia ya no oyó más. Se repitió durante días: «¡Su imagen de la mujer constante!». Ahora, cuando él la abandonaba por segunda vez, la alabanza de su constancia llevaba el doloroso aspecto de un capricho en el rostro.

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22 Los «cabezas peladas» *(Roundheads)* fueron los partidarios del Parlamento durante las guerras civiles del siglo XVII en Inglaterra. La «Infernal de París», citada poco después, se refiere a los dirigentes de la Revolución francesa.

V

Clara Middleton

El gran encuentro de sir Willoughby Patterne y la señorita Middleton había tenido lugar en Cherriton Grange, hogar de un grande del condado, donde por primera vez se vio a esta joven de dieciocho años elevarse sobre el horizonte. Tenía dinero y salud y belleza, la trinidad del estrellato perfecto que convierte en astrónomos a los hombres. Él la miró, esperando que ella lo mirase. Pero tan pronto como miró descubrió que debía estar en movimiento para obtener una mirada a cambio. Era uno más; tenía muchos por delante, todos ellos dispuestos. Tenía que debatir consigo mismo cómo comunicarle que era Willoughby Patterne antes de que sus guantes estuvieran demasiado ajados para adornar su amabilidad, pues aquí y allá, por todas partes, ofrecía su mano a sus parejas, oscuros varones cuyo tacto manchaba. En general, su estrellato era demasiado gracioso para complacerlo. El efecto, sin embargo, era el de empujarlo con toda su fuerza al calor de la caza, aunque no supiera de ella sino que él estaba compitiendo por un premio y que Willoughby Patterne era uno entre las docenas de la joven.

Estudiante más profundo de la ciencia que sus rivales, apreciaba el cumplido de la naturaleza en la elección que hacemos. Ahora sabemos científicamente que, en ese departamento de la lucha universal, el éxito le corresponde al mejor. Agitamos una cola más encantadora que la de nuestros semejantes, llevamos una cresta más hermosa, hacemos sonar una nota distinta, tenemos el paso más largo: ella pasará revista y nos seleccionará. El superlativo es magnético para ella. Podrá estar mirando hacia cualquier parte y nos verá: el superlativo solo tiene que hacer señas, ella resplandece a lo lejos. No puede evitarlo; está en su naturaleza y su naturaleza es la garantía de que la raza más noble de los hombres saldrá de ella. Al complementarnos, ella es una promesa de descendencia superior. Así, la ciencia o, mejor dicho, una familiaridad con la ciencia, facilita el cultivo de la aristocracia. En consecuencia, una persecución lograda y arrebatarla de un cuerpo de competidores nos dirá que somos los mejores. Más aún, se lo dirá al mundo.

Willoughby ostentó sus amables superlativos a los ojos de la señorita Middleton; tenía una pierna. Era el heredero de competidores de éxito. Tenía un estilo, un tono, un sastre artista, una autoridad en los modales; tenía, en el ardor de la caza entre una multitud, una frescura que le daba ventaja y, junto con su invariable energía cuando había que conquistar y poseer una presa, lo hacía difícilmente resistible. No escatimó esfuerzos, pues era adusto y estaba sediento del puesto de ganador. Cortejó a su padre, consciente de que también los hombres, y los padres por encima de todos, tienen sus preferencias por la oferta más amplia, el bolsillo más hondo, las tierras más extensas, la consideración más respetable. A su manera, los hombres, igual que las mujeres, distinguen lo mejor y ayudan a tener éxito, como el doctor Middleton hizo desde luego en la crisis de la memorable proposición dirigida a su hija al mes de la recepción de sir Willoughby en Upton Park. La joven estaba asombrada del torbellino de pretendientes y se inclinó como un retoño de árbol. Pidió tiempo; Willoughby apenas podía esperar. Sin vacilar, ella confesó que nadie le gustaba más y él consintió. Un tranquilo examen de su posición le dijo que no estaba bien que él se comprometiera y ella no. Ella formuló el deseo de ver un poco del mundo antes de sentirse apurada. Lo alarmó; él asumió ser el increíble dios del amor bajo el disfraz más sutil de la divinidad. Habría obedecido sus órdenes, languidecido con resignación, si no hubiera sido por el deseo de su madre de ver establecerse a la futura lady Patterne antes de morir. El amor resplandeció astutamente bajo la máscara del deber filial, pero la súplica de urgencia era razonable. El doctor Middleton la juzgó razonable, suponiendo que su hija sintiera una inclinación. No carecía de ella, aunque tenía un deseo propio de la edad de ver un poco de mundo: agradecería un año, dijo. Willoughby redujo el año a seis meses y garantizó el término, por lo cual, como muestra de gratitud, ella accedió al compromiso y no era poca cosa susurrar una palabra. Le imploró que entrara en el estado de cautividad y pronunciara sus votos: una ceremonia privada, pero vinculante. Ella tenía salud y belleza y dinero para adornar esos dones; no es que él estipulara dinero con su noviazgo, pero añadía lustre para deslumbrar al mundo y, además, los perseguidores rivales acechaban, aullando y elevando sus dolidas gargantas a la luna. Debía estar cautiva.

Él no consideró el compromiso de ella una mera cuestión de susurros. Era una solemne petición de juramento. ¿Por qué no? Habiendo dicho «Soy tuya», podría decir «Soy completamente tuya, soy tuya para siempre, lo juro, no cambiaré nunca de opinión, soy tu esposa de corazón, tuya profundamente, nuestro compromiso está escrito en lo alto». A eso añadía consideradamente: «Hasta donde me concierne», una pieza de generosidad algo escalofriante, y él la obligó a su vez a que le hiciera pasar por el catecismo del amor del que

salió con fervientes respuestas que lo ataron a ella de una manera tan indisoluble que ella no podía dudar de ser amada. ¡Lo soy!, exclamó en los ecos de su corazón, con sencilla fe y asombro. Apenas había empezado a pensar en el amor cuando le salió al paso. No había pensado cálidamente en el amor y ahí estaba. Solo había soñado con el amor como una de las distantes bendiciones del poderoso mundo, que yacía en los bosques del mundo, atravesaba mares salvajes, velado, acompañado de grandes peligros, de un palpitante secreto, pero demasiado remoto para que su seno palpitara. La principal idea que tenía de él era que el amor enriquecía el mundo.

Así dio la señorita Middleton su asentimiento al principio de selección.

Y entonces el mejor de una hueste sopló intensamente su cuerno de triunfo.

Willoughby se había fijado en la más apropiada; justificaba el *dictum* de la ciencia. La supervivencia de los Patterne estaba asegurada. «Habría regateado», le dijo a su admiradora, la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, «por la salud sobre todo, pero ella lo tiene todo además: ascendencia, belleza, crianza; es lo que llaman una heredera y el mayor cumplido para su sexo». Con delicadeza transmitió al entendimiento de la dama que la señorita Middleton había sido arrebatada a una multitud sin que el aliento de la multitud hubiera ofendido su sensibilidad. Lo hizo con sarcasmo respecto a nuestras jóvenes modernas, que corren por el mundo mordisqueando y siendo mordisqueadas hasta que conocen un sexo tan bien como el otro y no son menos expertas en el mercado que los hombres; puras, tal vez; no es tan fácil decir que inocentes, decididamente no nuestro ideal femenino. La señorita Middleton era distinta: era el verdadero ideal, una fruta matutina recién depositada en la cesta con la garantía de su rubor.

Las mujeres no defienden a sus hermanas más jóvenes por hacer lo que ellas tal vez hayan hecho: levantar un velo para ser vistas y disimular en un mundo en el que la inocencia es una garantía tan pobre como la membrana que protege a un embrión en un naufragio. Las mujeres de mundo no piensan en atacar la estipulación sensual del rubor perfecto, la pureza de plata que recuerda el origen oriental de la pasión amorosa de sus señores. La señora Mountstuart se alegró de la presa que sir Willoughby había cobrado en la feria occidental-oriental.

—Déjeme verla —dijo, y la señorita Middleton fue presentada y observada críticamente.

Tenía la boca que sonríe en reposo. Los labios alcanzaban su plenitud en el centro del arco y se adelgazaban en un tenue hoyuelo; también las pestañas se elevaban ligeramente en la parte exterior y parecían, como el labio en la límpida mejilla, avivar las sienes como con un rayo de luz o una ascensión de color. Sus rasgos se correspondían entre sí, sin que ninguno necesitara una rígida corrección, ni la nariz la ordinaria dignidad de la gobernanta entre las muchachas alegres, pese a que la nariz era de un hermoso diseño, ni agudamente interrogativa ni respingona. Unos álamos temblando en el agua, a la espera de la brisa, habrían ofrecido al enamorado susceptible una sugerencia de su rostro: liso y blanco, suavemente encarnado en las mejillas, en el que mansos roces asomaban incluso en quietud. Sus ojos eran pardos, bien situados, a menudo con sombra y despiertos. Su pelo, de un castaño claro, recogido, imponía el triángulo de un fabuloso bosque salvaje desde la frente hasta la boca y la barbilla, evidentemente de acuerdo con su gusto, y el triángulo le sentaba bien, aunque su rostro no evocara lo salvaje ni lo débil; su boca cerrada trazaba un arco para evitar ese efecto; sus ojos oscilaban solo con sentido del humor, listos cuando se despertaba la atención y, en esos momentos, el tocado semejante a un hayedo en invierno perdía su aire de ninfa y caprichoso y, extrañamente, por el mero contorno, añadía a su apariencia una estudiada concentración. Si observamos a un halcón con las alas desplegadas sobre la presa que acecha nos haremos una idea de ese cambio en el aspecto de una joven dama a quien Vernon Whitford comparaba con Eco y de la que la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson dijo que era una «refinada pícara de porcelana» [23] .

La fantasía de Vernon debió de surgir de las reacciones impetuosas y musicales de la señorita Middleton. Vernon prefería la compañía de su ilustrado padre a la de una muchacha de veinte años comprometida con su primo, pero el encanto de su dispuesta lengua y de su voz era para su entendimiento un ingenio inteligente, ingenio natural, ingenio cristalino, completamente opuesto al ingenio artificial de la ciudad. En sus elogios no mencionaba el ingenio de la señorita Middleton; sin embargo, se atrevió a mencionárselo a la señora Mountstuart, lo que causó que esa dama dijera: «Ah sí, no había advertido el ingenio. Ha de tener usted el arte de sonsacarlo».

Nadie había advertido el ingenio. El corrupto oído de la gente requiere una colisión de sonidos, supuso Vernon. Por su parte, para probar su excelencia, reunió una buena cantidad de las observaciones de la señorita Middleton; le llegaban volando y, hasta donde se permitía pronunciarlas en alto, tenían una curiosa abundancia de sentido. No podían deberse del todo a sus modales, por mucho que sus modales pudieran echarlas a perder. Hasta cierto punto, podría ser su viveza al captar el tono y la sombra de una conversación evanescente. Tal vez podía probarse el ingenio recordando el conjunto de una conversación donde ella hubiera estado presente, aunque ¿quién podría retener la mayor parte? Como era inútil tratar de argumentar en un asunto que solo le reportaba a él en persona, y en apariencia solo a él, un aire fresco y alegre, Ver-

non decidió guardárselo para sí mismo. En consecuencia, los elogios de su belleza, una posesión en la que él no la consideraba tan destacada, lo irritaban. Para adular a sir Willoughby, era corriente exaltarla como un ejemplo de belleza, providencialmente escogido para corresponder a su ejemplo masculino. Se la comparó a aquellas flores delicadas, las damas de la Corte de China, sobre papel de arroz. Un sencillo vestido francés le encajaba a la perfección en el césped junto a la fuente, entre los laúdes y susurros de las embrujadas pastoras de seda, que vivían aunque no estuvieran. Lady Busshe recordó las líneas favoritas de las mujeres de Leonardo, los ángeles de Luini. Lady Culmer había visto esbozos de cera de damiselas de la aristocracia francesa que se le parecían. Alguien mencionó una antigua estatua de una figura que tocaba la flauta y la boca tenía un parecido distante con la inclinación de su boca, pero esa comparación se rechazó por grotesca.

Por una vez la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson no tuvo éxito. Su «refinada pícara de porcelana» desagradó a sir Willoughby. «¿Por qué pícara?», dijo. La fama de la dama de dar en el blanco lo inquietó y la gracia del hermoso porte de su prometida acudió a apoyarlo en su objeción. Clara era joven, sana, encantadora; era adecuada, por tanto, para ser su esposa, la madre de sus hijos, el retrato de su compañera. Desde luego quedaban bien juntos. Al caminar con ella, al inclinarse hacia ella, todo el hombre era consciente de la imagen femenina de sí mismo por la exquisita falta de parecido de ella. Ella lo completaba, añadía las líneas más suaves que le faltaban a su retrato delante del mundo. La había rondado rabiosamente; la había cortejado debidamente, con el aplomo viril revitalizado por el tacto más atento que agrada a las muchachas. No parecía infravalorarse al valorarla: un secreto inestimable en el cortejo de jóvenes con cabeza; el enamorado dobla su sensación de valía personal sin renunciar a la suya. Fueron días orgullosos y felices, cabalgando con *Black Norman* hasta Upton Park, con su dama esperándolo y sabiendo que llegaba por el latido más fuerte de su corazón.

También ella era receptiva. Fue sensible a sus características y le proporcionó una fiesta. Recordaba sus frases al azar, observaba sus costumbres, sus peculiaridades, como nadie de su sexo había hecho. Willoughby le agradeció a su primo Vernon que dijera que ella tenía ingenio. Lo tenía y tan elevado que, cuanto más pensaba en el epigrama que le habían dedicado, más le desagradaba. Con ingenio para entenderlo y corazón para adorarlo, ella tenía una dignidad raramente vista en las jóvenes.

—¿Por qué pícara? —le insistió a la señora Mountstuart.

—Dije de porcelana —contestó.

—Pícara me deja perplejo.

—Porcelana lo explica.

—Tiene un sentido muy agudo del honor.

—Estoy segura de que es un parangón de rectitud.

—Tiene un hermoso porte.

—La carroza de una joven princesa.

—La encuentro perfecta.

—Sin embargo, puede ser una refinada pícara de porcelana.

—¿Juzga por la mente o la persona, madam?

—Por ambas.

—¿Y cuál es cuál?

—No hay distinción.

—Pícara y señora de Patterne no casan juntas.

—¿Por qué no? Será una novedad en nuestra vecindad y animará la casa.

—Para ser francos, pícara no se corresponde debidamente *conmigo* .

—Considérelo un suplemento.

—¿Le gusta?

—¡Estoy enamorada de ella! Puedo imaginar una larga vida de diversión en su compañía. Siga mi consejo: aprecie la porcelana y juegue con la pícara.

Sir Willoughby asintió apesadumbrado. No había nada de pícaro en él, de modo que no podía haberlo en su prometida. Los elfos, las travesuras, las peculiaridades eran antipáticas a su natural y argumentó que era imposible que hubiera escogido como complemento a una persona que mereciera esos nombres. Su genio tutelar no lo habría aprobado. Su estrecha familiaridad con la señorita Middleton corroboraba sus primeras impresiones; eso es convincente; el jurado corriente justifica que el gran jurado le haya presentado el caso y la conducta cotidiana de Clara confirmaba su conclusión original: que era esencialmente femenina, en otras palabras, un parásito y un cáliz. Empezó a instruirla en el conocimiento de sí mismo sin reserva y ella, conforme fue perdiendo la timidez con él, se hizo más reflexiva.

—Juzgo por el carácter —le dijo Willoughby a la señora Mountstuart.

—Si ha captado el carácter de una muchacha —dijo ella.

—Creo que no estoy lejos.

—Eso pensó el hombre que buscó la luna en un pozo.

—¡Cómo desprecian su sexo las mujeres!

—Nada de eso. Ella no tiene carácter aún. Usted lo está formando y ojalá siga el consejo y sea feliz; lo sólido es su guía más segura; la fisonomía y los modales le enseñarán más del carácter de una muchacha que todas sus buscas. Es una joven encantadora, aunque solo una más de esa clase.

—¿De qué clase? —preguntó sir Willoughby con impaciencia.

—Pícaras de porcelana.

—¡Estoy seguro de que no lo entenderé nunca!

—No puedo ayudarle más.

—¡La palabra pícara!

—Era refinada pícara.

—¿Diría que frágil?

—Soy completamente incapaz de decirlo.

—¿Una travesura inocente?

—Hermosamente moldeada en una delicada sustancia.

—¿Piensa en alguna pieza de Dresde que supone que se le parece?

—Me atrevería a decirlo.

—¿Artificial?

—¿No la querría natural?

—Estoy cordialmente satisfecho con ella de la cabeza a los pies, mi querida señora Mountstuart.

—Nada podría resultar mejor. A veces ella mandará y en general lo hará usted y todo irá bien, mi querido sir Willoughby.

Como todos los conversadores rápidos, la señora Mountstuart detestaba el análisis de sus frases. Tenían un aire de vaguedad y las lanzaba para que las cogieran, no para que las diseccionaran. Sus indicaciones para la lectura del carácter de la señorita Middleton eran las mismas que había dado para el de sir Willoughby, cuya fisonomía y modales delataban lo que presumía ser: un caballero espléndidamente orgulloso, con buenas razones.

El consejo de la señora Mountstuart era más sabio que su proceder, pues se había detenido donde Willoughby declinaba empezar. Excavó por debajo de la superficie sin estudiar ese índice de páginas. Había ganado la mano de la señorita Middleton; creía haber capturado su corazón, pero no estaba tan seguro de poseer su alma y fue en su busca. Nuestro enamorado caballero no había tenido en cuenta la escritura de la naturaleza en sus descubrimientos de las profundidades. Pero es un peligroso compañero de ese hábito de excavar que, donde no iluminemos los descubrimientos que anticipamos, nos pongamos a sembrar y plantar, lo que acaba por alterar el manso suelo. Los rasgos de la señorita Middleton eran legibles como lo primordial de su carácter. Willoughby podría haber visto que tenía un espíritu que amaba naturalmente la libertad y requería lo siguiente a la libertad, espacio, si tenía que mostrar su adhesión. Esos rasgos, por desgracia, en lugar de servir de introducción al interior, le sirvieron de espejo de sí mismo. Eran, de hecho, de una amable dulzura para tentar al enamorado aceptado a pasar de la primera persona a la segunda. Pero Willoughby había descubierto que diferían en uno o dos puntos y una diferencia de opinión en su prometida turbaba su reposo. Volvió a ello recurrentemente para mostrarle su error bajo diversos aspectos. Quería configurar su carácter de acuerdo con su concepción de lo femenino y manifestó la sorpresa de una ligera decepción cuando ella abogó por sus ideas. La señorita Middleton dijo inmediatamente: «No es demasiado tarde, Willoughby», y lo hirió, pues él quería que ella simplemente fuera material en sus manos para moldearla; no tenía otro pensamiento. Disertó para ella sobre el tema del amor infinito. ¿Cómo que no era demasiado tarde? Estaban comprometidos; eran uno eternamente, no podían separarse. Ella escuchó con seriedad mientras concebía el infinito como una estrecha morada donde una voz zumbaba sin cesar. Sin embargo, escuchaba. Se convirtió en una atenta oyente.

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23 *Rogue* («pícara») tenía también el significado, ahora obsoleto, de «grieta» o «defecto» de una pieza de cerámica. La porcelana desempeña un papel fundamental en la narración. Véanse los capítulos XVII y XXXIV y recuérdese la frase de sir Willoughby en el capítulo VI: «Todo lo que hemos ganado con la civilización se resquebraja».

VI

Su cortejo

El mundo era el principal motivo de disensión entre estos enamorados. La opinión que sir Willoughby tenía del mundo afectaba a Clara como a una criatura privada de aire. Le explicó a su amada que los enamorados por necesidad odian el mundo. Viven en el mundo, aceptan sus beneficios y participan hasta donde pueden. En sus corazones deben despreciarlo, esquivarlo, para que su amor recíproco se vierta en un canal limpio con toda la fuerza que tengan. No disfrutarán de la sensación de seguridad de su amor a menos que mantengan a raya el mundo. Concederás que es grosero, una bestia. Formalmente agradecemos el bien que obtenemos de él, solo que nosotros dos tenemos un templo interior donde nuestro culto es realmente, basta con verlo, una excomunión del mundo. Abjuramos de esa bestia para adorar a esa divinidad. Eso nos da nuestra unidad, nuestro aislamiento, nuestra felicidad. Eso es amar con el alma. ¿Lo ves, querida?

Clara sacudía la cabeza; no lo veía. No admitía ninguno de los notorios errores del mundo; sus murmuraciones, egoísmo, vulgaridad, intrusiones, contagios. Era joven. Willoughby pensó que podría dejarse llevar: no era dócil. Debía alzarse en armas como una campeona del mundo y podía verse que se aferraba a su sueño de un mundo romántico y nada más. Echó a perder la secreta canción que le encantaba cantarle. ¿Cómo, poderes del amor? ¿Podemos perseguir el amor sin expulsar al mundo y lavarnos las manos? El amor que no desdeña el mundo cuando los enamorados se aíslan es un amor —¿no es cierto?— que al mundo burlón le parece que se escabulle en la oscuridad de los besos en lugar de marchar gloriosamente tras la pantalla. Nuestro héroe tenía el firme sentimiento de despreciar el mundo para defender su orgullo personal y (sea dicho en su honor) la delicadeza de su dama.

El hecho de despreciar los ponía por encima del mundo, decía; *retro Sathanas!* También como una táctica: Willoughby era extremadamente civilizado; en el segundo caso, sabía que el mundo debe quemar las astillas secas en el fuego de la adoración de una mujer. Sabía también que prescribía poesía a su prometida, poesía practicable. A ella le gustaba la poesía y a veces la citaba para desafiar su boca fruncida y su penoso murmullo: «No soy poeta», pero su poesía de enramada cerrada y fortificada, sin rimas absurdas que captaran los oídos de las mujeres, le parecía incomprensible, si no adversa. Ella no habría quemado el mundo por él; aunque una poesía más pura apenas fuera imaginable, no se habría reducido a cenizas ni incienso ni esencia en su honor y eso, por la transmutación del amor, era literalmente el hombre con el que iba a casarse. ¡Prefería ser ella misma, con el egoísmo de las mujeres! Lo decía, decía: «Debo ser yo misma para ser de algún valor para ti, Willoughby». Él era infatigable en sus lecciones sobre la estética del amor. Con frecuencia, para indemnizarla (no quería que perdiera al dejar de admirar el mundo), se detenía en sus propias ideas de juventud y le ofrecía sus fantasías originales sobre el mundo como sustituto.

La señorita Middleton lo sobrellevaba, pues estaba segura de sus buenas intenciones. Al sobrellevar lo que le disgustaba, se hizo menos capaz de sobrellevar lo que ya había observado: la opinión de Willoughby sobre la erudición, sus modales con Vernon Whitford, de quien su padre hablaba con afecto, los rumores sobre el trato con cierta señorita Dale. El cuento rural de Constanza Durham le sonaba en una nueva clave. Willoughby no despreciaba las alabanzas del mundo. El señor Whitford había escrito las cartas al periódico local que le habían procurado el aplauso en varias casas y él lo aceptaba y delataba un estremecimiento de ser víctima de la burla del mundo que despreciaba. Al recordar las observaciones de sir Willoughby, a Clara le afligía «algo ilógico» en él que descubrimos cuando nuestras naturalezas ya no discurren libremente y anhelamos enseguida una disputa. Decidió que un día, un día distante, la provocaría. ¿Sobre qué? El punto en cuestión era elusivo para ella. El mundo es un cliente demasiado abigarrado, permeable, irregular para que una muchacha pueda defenderse de un hombre. Ese «algo ilógico» había excitado sus sentimientos para la revuelta más que su inteligencia. No podía constituirse en abogada del señor Whitford. Pero señaló la disputa para un acontecimiento próximo.

Al meditar sobre ello, se encontró imaginando el rostro que puso sir Willoughby con los primeros acentos del firme desacuerdo de ella con él. Una vez conjurada, la imagen no se desvaneció. Sir Willoughby era encantador, tan correctamente encantador que un ligero toque inamistoso lo empujó a la caricatura. Su habitual aspecto de orgullo feliz, más bien de contento indignado, no se deshacía con facilidad. La sorpresa, cuando ponía énfasis en ello, lo estiraba con las cejas arqueadas de una máscara, sin límite bajo el encanto de la caricatura, y cada vez que a ella no le gustaban sus propios pensamientos se encontraba con eso, no con el parecido de él, como su visión. Era injusto, contrario a sus sentimientos más profundos; se rechazaba

a sí misma y, hasta donde su travieso espíritu se lo permitía, trataba de contemplarlo como lo hacía el mundo, esforzándose por introducir reflexiones en las bendiciones de la ignorancia. Le parecía estar rodeada de duendes, apenas responsable de sus pensamientos.

Willoughby eclipsó al señor Whitford en su conducta con el joven Crossjay. Clara lo había visto con el muchacho y se mostraba divertido, indulgente, casi juguetón, en contraste con la severidad tutorial del señor Whitford. Tenía el tono del padre inglés de permisión liberal de los gustos y chanzas del muchacho y administraba la parcialidad del género respecto al dinero. No jugaba al maestro de escuela, como los ratones de biblioteca que se ocupan de pobres chiquillos.

El señor Whitford la evitaba cuanto podía. Fue a Upton Park a visitar a su padre y ella no lamentó en particular haberlo visto solo en la mesa. La trató a golpes de vista cuyo escrutinio y penetración no resultaron agradables. A ella le gustaron sus ojos. Se hicieron insoportables: persistían en la memoria como si hubieran trazado una línea fosforescente. Sus compañeros de juego en la infancia la habían hecho mirar a través de las hojas de los setos, donde habían anidado los pájaros, y los ojos del animal en aquel maravilloso hogar en la espesura la habían transportado a mundos de fantasía. La mirada del señor Whitford hizo revivir su susceptibilidad, pero no el antiguo y feliz asombro. Le alegró su ausencia, tras haber pasado una hora con Willoughby, una hora desgraciada en el recuerdo. El señor Whitford se había ido y llegó Willoughby, trayendo malas noticias de la salud de su madre. Lady Patterne iba apagándose. Su hijo habló de la pérdida que supondría para él; habló de lo terrible que es la muerte. Aludió a su propia muerte, sin tacto, con un aire filosófico.

—¡Todos debemos irnos! Tenemos poco tiempo.

—Cierto —asintió ella.

Sonó a falta de sentimiento.

—¡Si me pierdes, Clara!

—Pero tú eres fuerte, Willoughby.

—Puedo desaparecer mañana.

—No hables de ese modo.

—Hemos de hacerle frente.

—No veo con qué propósito.

—¡Me perderías, amor mío!

—¡Willoughby!

—¡Oh la amarga punzada de dejarte!

—Querido Willoughby, estás muy afectado; tu madre se recuperará; esperemos que lo haga; ayudaré a cuidarla; me he ofrecido, ya lo sabes; estoy dispuesta, ansiosa. Creo que soy una buena enfermera.

—Es esa creencia... ¡Que no morimos con la muerte!

—Ese es nuestro consuelo.

—¿Cuando amamos?

—¿No es una promesa de encontrarnos de nuevo?

—Caminar por el mundo y verte tal vez... ¡Con otro!

—¿Verme? ¿Dónde? ¿Aquí?

—Comprometida... Con otro. ¡Tú! Mi novia, a quien llamo mía ¡y lo eres! ¡Lo serías aún en ese horror! Pero ¡todo es posible, las mujeres son mujeres, nadan en la infidelidad, de ola en ola! Las conozco.

—Willoughby, no te atormentes ni me atormentes a mí. Te lo ruego.

Meditó profundamente y le preguntó:

—¿Podrías ser una santa entre las mujeres?

—Creo que soy una chiquilla más jovial de lo acostumbrado.

—¿No me olvidarás?

—Oh no.

—¿Aún eres mía?

—Soy tuya.

—¿Me das tu palabra?

—Dada.

—¿Mía más allá de la muerte?

—El matrimonio es el matrimonio, creo.

—¡Clara! ¡Dedicar tu vida a nuestro amor! ¡Sin un solo roce! ¡Ni un murmullo! ¡Ni un pensamiento ni un sueño! ¿Podrías? Imaginarlo me hace agonizar... ¿Inviolada? ¿Mía por encima de todo? ¿Mía ante todos, aunque me haya ido, fiel a mi polvo? Dímelo. Dame la seguridad. ¡Fiel a mi nombre! Oh, los oigo. «Su luto». Murmuraciones sobre lady Patterne. «La viuda». ¡Si supieras lo que dicen de las viudas! ¡Tapate los oídos, ángel mío! Pero si ella los mantiene a raya y sigue su camino, se ven obligados a respetarla. El marido

muerto no es el desgraciado sin honor que imaginan, porque está fuera de su alcance. Vive en el corazón de su mujer. ¡Clara! ¡Mi Clara! Mientras viva en ti, aquí o allá, seas esposa o viuda, no habrá distinción en el amor: soy tu marido —dilo— eternamente. He de tener paz, no puedo soportar el dolor. Deprimido, sí; tengo motivos para estarlo. Pero me han acechado desde que nos dimos la mano. ¡Tenerte, perderte!

—¿No es posible que yo sea la primera en morir? —dijo la señorita Middleton.

—Y perderte, pensando que tú, encantadora como eres, y los perros del mundo ladrando a tu alrededor, puedas... ¿Es extraño que sienta lo que siento por el mundo? ¡Esta mano! El pensamiento es horrible. Estarías rodeada; los hombres son bestias; el aroma de la infidelidad los excita, los estimula. ¡Y yo inútil! El pensamiento es enloquecedor. Veo un círculo de monos burlándose. Ahí está tu belleza y el placer del hombre al desacralizar. Día y noche temerías dejar mi nombre para... Siento el golpe ahora. No te darían descanso. No podrías aferrarte a nada sin tu juramento.

—¡Un juramento! —dijo la señorita Middleton.

—No deliro, amor mío, cuando te digo que con ese pensamiento sobre mí veo un círculo de caras de mono burlándose de mí: me acechan. Pero ¡jurarás! Una vez y no volveré a molestarte al respecto. ¡Debilidad, si quieres! Te darás cuenta de que es amor, el amor de un hombre, más fuerte que la muerte.

—¿Un juramento? —dijo ella, y movió los labios para recordar lo que podría haber dicho y olvidado—. ¿De qué? ¿Qué juramento?

—¡Que me serás fiel tanto muerto como vivo! Susúrralo.

—Willoughby, seré fiel a mis votos ante el altar.

—¡A mí! ¡A mí!

—Será para ti.

—A mi alma. No hay cielo para mí, no veo ninguno, solo tortura, a menos que tenga tu palabra, Clara. Confío en ello. Confío implícitamente. Mi confianza en ti es absoluta.

—Entonces no has de inquietarte.

—Es por *ti,* amor mío; para que estés armada y seas fuerte cuando yo no esté para protegerte.

—Nuestras maneras de ver el mundo son opuestas, Willoughby.

—Consiento; gratifícame; júralo. Di: «Más allá de la muerte». Susúrralo. No te pediré nada más. Las mujeres piensan que la tumba de su marido rompe el vínculo, corta el lazo, los separa. Casaron la *carne,* ¡bah! Lo que te pido es nobleza: la nobleza trascendente de la fidelidad más allá de la muerte. *¡Su* viuda!, dirán, una santa en la viudedad.

—Mis votos ante el altar son suficientes.

—¿No quieres? ¡Clara!

—Estoy comprometida contigo.

—¿Ni una palabra? ¿Una simple promesa? Pero ¿me amas?

—Te he dado la mayor prueba que puedo darte.

—Considera cuánta confianza he depositado en ti.

—Espero que bien depositada.

—¡Podría arrodillarme ante ti para adorarte si quisieras, Clara!

—Arrodíllate ante el cielo, no ante mí, Willoughby. Soy... Querría ser capaz de decir lo que soy. Tal vez sea inconstante: no me conozco a mí misma. Piensa, pregúntate si soy realmente la persona con la que deberías casarte. Tu esposa habría de tener grandes cualidades de mente y de alma. Estoy dispuesta a oír que no las tengo y soportar el veredicto.

—¡Las tienes, las tienes! —exclamó Willoughby—. Cuando conozcas mejor el mundo, entenderás mi ansiedad. Vivo, soy fuerte para escudarte de él; muerto, inútil: eso es todo. Estarías guarnecida, a prueba de acero, serías inviolable si quisieras... Pero trata de ponerte en mi lugar. Cuando hayas comprendido la intensidad del amor de un hombre como yo, no hará falta que te lo pida. Es la diferencia entre los elegidos y los vulgares, entre el ideal del amor y el acoplamiento del rebaño. Dejémoslo estar. Al menos tengo tu mano. Mientras viva tengo tu mano. ¿No debería estar satisfecho? Lo estoy, solo que veo más lejos que la mayoría de los hombres y siento más profundamente. Ahora debo correr junto al lecho de mi madre. ¡Lady Patterne se muere! Podría ser que... pero ¡es una mujer entre las mujeres! ¡Con un suegro! ¡Cielos! ¿Podría haber estado junto a ella con los mismos sentimientos de reverencia? Con muy poco, amor mío, todo lo que hemos ganado con la civilización se resquebraja; volvemos al mortero donde fuimos machacados y removidos. Mis pensamientos, cuando me siento a velarla, llegan a esta conclusión: que, especialmente en las mujeres, se trata de la distinción. De otro modo somos una masa humana mezclada. Las mujeres deberían enseñarnos a venerarlas o no dejaremos de balar, ladrar y rugir. Basta por ahora. Solo tienes que pensar un poco. Debo irme. Podría haber sucedido durante mi ausencia. Escribiré. ¿Tendré noticias tuyas? Ven a verme montar a *Black Norman* . Preséntale mis respetos a tu padre. No tengo tiempo para hacerlo yo mismo. ¡Uno!

Cogió el uno —el número místico del amor— del que suelen salir multitudes, pero, en esta ocasión, fue

solo uno y frío. Ella lo vio alejarse en su galante caballo, todo lo encantador como caballero que el mundo podía mostrar, y el contraste con su reciente lenguaje y su hermosa figura fue un enigma que le heló la sangre. Un discurso tan extraño a sus oídos, innatural en el tono, falto de virilidad incluso en un enamorado (al que se le permite un dialecto más suave), la hizo sondear su fuente y su deriva. Se alegró de no tener que encontrarse con ojos como los del señor Vernon Whitford.

En descargo de sir Willoughby ha de decirse que su madre, sin infringir el grado de respeto por sus decisiones y sentimientos que él exigía, le había hablado de la señorita Middleton, sugiriéndole una volatilidad de carácter en la joven dama que le impresionó por el parecido con la «pícara de porcelana» de la señora Mountstuart y que lo alarmó, al ser observaciones independientes de dos mujeres conocedoras del mundo. No le correspondía personalmente acreditar la volatilidad para asegurarse, hasta donde pudiera, del alma de su novia y sostener la seguridad de su conducta. El deseo para ello estaba en él; su madre solo había tocado una campana de advertencia que él ya había tañido antes. Clara no era una Constanza. Pero era una mujer y las mujeres lo habían engañado, como seguramente a cualquier hombre que fomentara su elevado ideal de las mujeres. Su esfuerzo era bastante natural para su pasión y su tema. El lenguaje de los sentimientos primitivos de los hombres se expresa igual en todas las épocas, salvo los colores primitivos de un caballero moderno al dirigirse a su dama.

Lady Patterne murió en la temporada de invierno del nuevo año. En abril el doctor Middleton tenía que dejar Upton Park y no había encontrado un lugar de residencia ni sabía qué hacer consigo mismo ante la perspectiva del matrimonio de su hija y su marcha. Sir Willoughby le propuso encontrar una casa en el circuito de la vecindad de Patterne. Además, invitó al reverendo doctor y a su hija a venir a Patterne desde Upton durante un mes y conocer a sus tías, las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel Patterne, de modo que no le resultara tan extraño a Clara tenerlas en casa tras su matrimonio. El doctor Middleton omitió consultar a su hija antes de aceptar la invitación y pareció, cuando habló con ella, que tendría que haberlo hecho. Pero ella dijo mansamente: «Muy bien, papá».

Sir Willoughby tuvo que visitar la metrópolis y una de sus haciendas en otro condado, desde donde escribió a su prometida diariamente. Volvió a Patterne a tiempo de disponer la bienvenida de sus invitados, aunque demasiado tarde para acompañarlos durante el traslado y, mientras tanto, durante su ausencia, la señorita Middleton había pensado que debería dedicar los últimos días de su libertad a sus amigos. Tras las semanas que iba a pasar en Patterne le quedaban pocas semanas para ella y quería ir a Suiza o el Tirol y ver los Alpes; una extraña idea, pensó su padre. La repitió seriamente y el doctor Middleton percibió una femenina oscilación de indecisión en la cabeza de Clara que lo inquietó, considerando que significaba vacilar entre la excelente biblioteca y la soberbia bodega de Patterne Hall, junto con la compañía del joven y prometedor erudito, el señor Vernon Whitford, por una parte, y una carrera de hoteles —equivalente a chocar con una monstruosa artillería de multitudes cada noche y verse disparado a viajar por el espacio cada mañana— por otra.

—Tendrás tu viaje y tus Alpes tras la ceremonia —dijo.

—Creo que preferiría quedarme en casa —dijo ella.

El doctor Middleton replicó:

—*Yo* lo preferiría.

—Pero aún no estoy casada, papá.

—Como si lo estuvieras, querida.

—Un cambio de aires, creo...

—Hemos aceptado la invitación de Willoughby y me ha ayudado a encontrar una casa cerca de ti.

—¿Quieres estar cerca de mí, papá?

—Próximo, a distancia: comunicable.

—¿Por qué habríamos de separarnos?

—Por la sencilla razón, querida, de que cambias un padre por un marido.

—¿Y si no quisiera cambiarlo?

—Para comprar has de pagar, niña. Los maridos no se dan por nada.

—No. Pero debo tenerte, papá.

—¿Debes?

—Aún no nos han separado, querido papá.

—¿Qué significa eso? —preguntó escrupulosamente. Estaba empezando a sudar, temeroso de una turbación de la serenidad tan querida por los eruditos a causa de la posposición de la ceremonia y una prolongación de las preocupaciones paternas.

—Oh, el significado corriente, papá —dijo ella, atenta a cómo lo encajaba.

—Ah —dijo él, cabeceando y parpadeando hasta recobrar la compostura, contento de apaciguarse de cualquier forma, pues la mutabilidad es otro nombre del sexo y es una enemiga del erudito.

Clara sugirió que dos semanas en Patterne ofrecerían mucho tiempo para inspeccionar las casas vacías del distrito y serían suficientes, considerando las exigencias de los amigos y la necesidad de visitar las tiendas de Londres.

—Dos o tres semanas —concedió él apresuradamente como compromiso con esa temible perspectiva.

VII

Los novios

DURANTE el traslado de Upton a Patterne, la señorita Middleton esperaba, y lo creía en parte, que hubiera un cambio en la manera de cortejarla de sir Willoughby. Había sido un pretendiente muy distinto. Recordaba con el fervor de cierta desesperación semiconsciente lo que había pensado de él en sus primeras aproximaciones y al aceptarlo. ¿Lo había visto con los ojos del mundo, pensando que eran los suyos? Su aspecto, el aspecto de «contento indignado», había sido un aspecto de conquista sumamente noble, espléndido como la pluma de un general al galope. No podía alterarse. ¿Eran sus ojos los que se habían alterado?

El espíritu de aquellos días se agitó en su interior para reprochárselo y que suspirase por su renovación: recordaba sus sueños rosados y la imagen que tenía de él, su palpitante orgullo por él, su sofocante abundancia de felicidad y también su vano intento por ser muy humilde, que solía terminar en una cancioncilla evocadora al pensar en ella, no carente de encanto, pero evocadora, inquietante.

Ahora bien, los hombres cuyos ingresos se restringen hasta el punto de que deben vivir de su capital pronto se libran de la previsora angustia que los devasta por los hilarantes consuelos del regazo en el que han caído y se solazan de las intolerables anticipaciones de hambre en la casa entregándose a incansables derroches. De igual modo los enamorados viven de su capital por la falta de ingresos; también ellos, por la agobiante aprensión y la estrechez de la hora presente, derrochan sus reservas tan rápidamente que merman: tienen sus arranques de intoxicación a la vista del hambre venidera, fuerzan a jugar a la memoria, aman retrospectivamente, entran en la vieja casa del pasado y arrasan la despensa, y alegremente, incluso con resolución, seguirían con su ilusión si fuera posible que la mayor reserva de miel de las reminiscencias se mantuviera en el tiempo ante un apetito mortal, lo que en realidad plantea la alternativa de una consunción de la colmena o de la criatura que tiene que alimentar. Los enamorados se muestran aquí perecederos. Más que el pobre mundo de barro necesitan suministros, jugos saludables; por decirlo así, la vida a punto de estallar, los frutos aún en el árbol más que el forraje empaquetado. Esto último es excelente para un rato, cuando hay mucho más que recordar y al apetito solo le queda un diente. Si se hubieran saturado de sus primeras impresiones y las hubieran conservado, con el amor de la sensata luz de la razón, habrían recogido una hermosa cosecha, como al principio; pero eso es raro. En otras palabras, el amor es cosa de dos y solo para dos puede ser tan vivaz, tan constante en la intercomunicación como lo son el sol y la tierra, a través de la nube o cara a cara. Toman el aliento de la vida el uno del otro en señales de afecto, pruebas de fidelidad, incentivos de admiración. Así ocurre con los hombres y las mujeres en la buena época del amor. Pero un alma solitaria que arrastra un leño ha de hacer del leño un dios para regocijarse con la carga. Eso no es amor.

Clara era la menos adecuada de todas las mujeres para arrastrar un leño. Pocas muchachas habrían agotado tan pronto su capital. Desde luego era femenina, pero quería camaradería, un vivo y franco intercambio de lo mejor de ambos, con los sentimientos más profundos intactos. Asentarse en la boca de una mina y tener que descender a ella diariamente sin descubrir una gran opulencia debajo; por el contrario, estremecerse ante la falta de sol subterránea, sin una cualidad sustancial a la que aferrarse, solo el misterio de una vela de sebo, insuficiente en aquellas cavernas de la complaciente conversación masculina, le parecía una prueba demasiado extremada para dos o tres semanas. ¡Cuánto más para toda una vida!

Por naturaleza era dada a esperar, a mantener las expectativas y creer que sir Willoughby volvería a ser el hombre que había conocido cuando lo aceptó. De manera especial, para mostrar su sencillez de espíritu, era inconsciente de mostrarse fría con él; solo conocía de sí misma su inquietud, sus objeciones a esto o aquello, su deseo de cambios. No soñaba con apresurarse en el sentimiento pasivo o negativo del amor, en el que un paso en falso nos precipita en el estado de repulsión.

Sus ojos eran vivaces cuando se encontraron y también lo eran los de él. Le gustó verlo en los escalones, con el joven Crossjay bajo su brazo. Sir Willoughby le contó del mejor humor que el muchacho se había metido en el laboratorio para escapar de su tutor y había roto las ventanas. Clara amonestó al delincuente con el mismo espíritu cuando sir Willoughby la tomó en sus brazos en el umbral, susurrando: «¡Pronto para bien!». En respuesta al susurro, ella le pidió que le contara más cosas de la historia del joven Crossjay. «Ven al laboratorio», le dijo él, menos risueña que suavemente, y Clara le pidió a su padre que viniera a ver las últimas travesuras del joven Crossjay. Sir Willoughby le susurró lo largo de su separación y su alegría al recibirla en la casa donde reinaría como dueña *muy* pronto. Contó las semanas. Susurró: «Ven». En ese momen-

to Clara no examinó el destello de terror que cruzó por su mente. Pasó y no fue más que la sombra que dobla la hierba de verano, aunque dejó una arruga en sus ideas al sorprenderse de haber tenido miedo de algo. Su padre estaba con ellos. Ella y Willoughby no estaban solos.

El joven Crossjay no había llevado a cabo una destrucción tan grande como el humor de sir Willoughby había proclamado. Había conectado una batería con un reguero de pólvora, lo que había resquebrajado un panel de la ventana y desencajado algunos ladrillos. El doctor Middleton preguntó si el joven estaba excluido de la biblioteca y se alegró al oír que era una puerta sellada para él. Se dirigieron a ella. Vernon Whitford había salido a dar uno de sus largos paseos.

—Ya ves, papá, que no es tan fiel contigo —dijo Clara.

El doctor Middleton se detuvo con el ceño fruncido sobre las notas de unos manuscritos en la mesa con la letra de Vernon. Se quitó el pelo de la frente y se dejó caer en una silla para inspeccionarlas cuidadosamente. Se quedó inmóvil. Clara se vio obligada a dejarlo allí. Empezó a pensar que Willoughby los había llevado a la biblioteca con el propósito de librarse de su protector y sintió miedo de él. Le propuso presentar sus respetos a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. No las habían visto y un lacayo les informó en la sala de estar que habían salido a dar un paseo. Apretó la mano del joven Crossjay. Sir Willoughby lo envió con la señora Montague, el ama de llaves, por té, pastas y mermelada.

—¡Fuera! —dijo, y el muchacho salió corriendo.

Clara se vio sin escudo.

—¡Y el jardín! —exclamó—. Amo el jardín. Tengo que ir y ver las flores que te gustan. En primavera cuido de las flores silvestres y si me muestras asfódelos, amarilis y anémonas...

—¡Mi querida Clara! ¡Mi novia! —dijo.

—¿Por qué son flores vulgares? —preguntó ella sin efecto para explicar por qué la había detenido.

¿Por qué no esperaba para merecerla? No, para merecerla no, para reconciliarla con su nueva posición; no para reconciliarla, sino para reparar su imagen en ella, antes de reclamar su aparente derecho.

No esperó. La apretó contra su pecho.

—Eres mía, Clara, completamente mía, cada pensamiento, cada sentimiento. Somos uno; que el mundo perezca. Te anhelaba, te esperaba. Me salvas de mil vejaciones. Continuamente nos cruzamos con ellas. Ahí está todo a nuestro alrededor. ¡Nosotros dos! ¡Contigo estoy seguro! ¡Pronto! No podría decirte si el mundo está vivo o muerto. ¡Querida mía!

Se separó de él con la sensación del chiquillo aterido que se ha bañado en el mar, pensando con distinción que al fin y al cabo no era un juicio tan severo. Esa era su idea y se dijo inmediatamente: ¿qué soy yo para quejarme? Dos minutos antes no lo habría pensado, pero el orgullo humillado cae más bajo que la humildad.

No lo culpó; fue ella la que perdió en su propia estima, menos porque fuera la novia Clara Middleton, lo que ahora era tan palpable como un disparo en el pecho de un pájaro, que porque era una mujer cautiva, de la que se espera que se someta por completo, cuando habría preferido contemplar flores. A Clara le avergonzaba su sexo. Las mujeres no podían dar un paso sin convertirse en siervas, ¡de qué esclavitud! En lo que le concernía, el juicio había acabado, pensó. Solo se quejaba de no haber analizado mejor lo prematuro y crudo que había sido todo. En realidad, no podía decirse que se quejara. Solo criticaba a sir Willoughby y se sorprendía de que un hombre fuera incapaz de percibir o no se detuviera al percibir involuntariedad, discordancia, torpe conformidad; el deber de la sierva en lugar del consentimiento de la novia. ¡Oh aguda distinción, como la de dos esferas!

Le hizo justicia; admitió que había empleado el tono del enamorado. Si no hubiera sido por la reiteración de «el mundo», no se habría opuesto críticamente a sus palabras, aunque fueran palabras de apropiación absoluta. Willoughby tenía derecho a usarlas, puesto que se iba a casar con él. Pero ¡si hubiera esperado antes de interpretar el papel de enamorado privilegiado!

Sir Willoughby estaba arrobado con ella. Habría prescrito a su novia la recepción de sus cuidados aun cuando fuera tan pura y fría como una estatua de Diana. Clara se ruborizó enseguida, lo que la mostró divinamente femenina en una reflexiva timidez, según las más elevadas definiciones del carácter femenino de Willoughby.

—Déjame llevarte al jardín, amor mío —dijo.

Ella respondió:

—Creo que prefiero irme a mi habitación.

—Te enviaré un ramillete de flores silvestres.

—Flores no; no me gusta que las cojan.

—Te espero en el césped.

—Me pesa la cabeza.

La profunda preocupación y la ternura de Willoughby lo acercaron más.

Le aseguró con viveza que estaba bien; estaba dispuesta a acompañarlo al jardín y pasear por el parque.

—No es *dolor* de cabeza —dijo ella.

Pero tenía que pagar el precio por invitar a la proximidad solícitamente aceptada de un caballero.

Esta vez se culpó a sí misma y a él, al mundo del que abusaba y al destino en el trato, y se preocupó menos por la prueba, pero anhelaba libertad. Con una frigidez que la sorprendió, se maravilló del acto de besar y la obligación con la que forzaba a una persona inanimada a ser cómplice. ¿Por qué no era libre? ¿Por qué extraño derecho era tratada como una posesión?

—Trataré de sacudirme esta pesadez —dijo.

—Mi chiquilla no debe fatigarse.

—Oh no, no lo haré.

—Siéntate conmigo. Tu Willoughby es tu devoto enfermero.

—Necesito aire.

—Caminaremos entonces.

Le horrorizó pensar lo lejos que había llegado con él y puso su mano sobre su brazo para apaciguar su autoacusación y propiciar el deber. Willoughby habló como ella deseaba; era su novia, casi su mujer; la conducta de ella era una especie de locura que no lograba entender.

El buen sentido y el deber le aconsejaron que dominara su caprichoso espíritu.

Él le acarició la mano y ella se acostumbró a eso; su mano estaba a distancia. ¿Y qué es una mano? Dejándola donde estaba, la trató como un vínculo entre ella y la bondad debida. ¡Dentro de dos meses sería una sierva de por vida! Lamentó no haberse marchado a su habitación para fortalecerse con un examen de su situación y encontrarse con él completamente resignada a su destino. Imaginaba que habría ido a verlo amablemente. Era su respeto ahora y su ágil conversación lo que engañaba a sus nervios crispados con esa fantasía. Cinco semanas de perfecta libertad en las montañas, pensaba, la habrían preparado para el día de las campanas. Todo lo que ella requería era una separación que le ofreciera nuevos escenarios, donde pudiera reflexionar sin ser turbada, volver a sentir claramente.

Willoughby la llevó por los arriates de flores, casi como si fuera una convaleciente que tomara el aire. Eso la irritó y la cubrió de remordimientos. Como contrición se explayó sobre la belleza del jardín.

—Es todo tuyo, Clara mía.

¡Le parecía una carga opresiva! Con pasividad cedió la posición al hombre en forma de atento cortesano; su mansión, sus propiedades y su riqueza la abrumaban. Sugerían el precio que había que pagar. Sin embargo, recordaba que en su último paseo por el parque se había sentido orgullosa de la verde extensión y de la amplitud de los árboles. Alguna clase de veneno debía estar obrando en ella. No había ido a verlo hoy con el sentimiento de un lóbrego antagonismo; lo había cogido allí.

—¿Estás bien, Clara mía?

—Muy bien.

—¿Ni un asomo de malestar?

—Ninguno.

—¡Mi novia ha de tener salud aunque todos los médicos del reino mueran para ello! ¡Querida!

—Y dime, ¿los perros?

—Los perros y los caballos están en muy buenas condiciones.

—Me alegro. Ya sabes que adoro esos viejos caserones franceses, castillos y granjas a la vez, cuyas ventanas dan al corral y los establos. Me gusta esa familiaridad con bestias y campesinos.

Él condescendió con indulgencia.

—Me temo que no podamos ofrecértelo en Inglaterra, Clara mía.

—No.

—Y me gusta la granja —dijo él—. Pero creo que nuestras salas de estar tienen una mejor atmósfera sobre el jardín. En cuanto a tus campesinos, no podemos, entiendo, modificar nuestras demarcaciones de clase sin arriesgarnos a desintegrar la estructura social.

—Tal vez. No propongo nada.

—Amor mío, te animaría a proponerlo si estuviera convencido de poder obedecerte.

—Eres muy bueno.

—No encuentro mi mérito en otra parte que no sea tu satisfacción.

Aunque no estaba sedienta de dulces dichos, la mansedumbre de algo distinto a las invitaciones a la exposición de sus misterios y del aislamiento de ambos en uno que indagó en su cerebro, por decirlo así en su cerebro, en busca de la ofensa específica que había cometido. Pasando de una sensación a otra, los jóvenes, a quienes las sensaciones empujan y distraen, apenas pueden datar su disgusto por uno en particular, a menos que sea una gran ofensa, y Clara no había sentido una vergüenza individual con sus caricias; la vergüenza de su sexo no era más que una protesta pasajera que no dejaba huella. Pensó que se había comportado

con crueldad y dijo: «Willoughby», porque era consciente de la omisión de su nombre en sus observaciones anteriores.

Toda su atención fue para ella.

Tuvo que inventar la continuación:

—Quería pedirte, Willoughby, que no trates de malcriarme. Me halagas. Los cumplidos no son para mí. Piensas en mí de un modo demasiado elevado. Es casi tan malo como ser desdeñoso. Soy... Soy...

Pero no pudo seguir con su ejemplo: incluso hasta donde había llegado, su remilgado y breve esbozo de sí misma la exponía a sus sentimientos reales, feos, serios, de una sencillez apocada, y era un paso en falso. ¿Cómo podía mostrarse como era?

—¿No te conozco? —dijo él.

Las melodiosas notas bajas, expresión de un convencimiento en este punto, significaban, igual que las palabras, que ninguna respuesta era la adecuada. Ella no podía disentir sin convertir la música en desafinada, la complacencia de Willoughby en sorpresa. Se mordió la lengua, sabiendo que él no la conocía y especulando sobre la desnudez de la división por grados de conocimiento; un profundo hoyo.

Willoughby aludió a amigos de la vecindad y suyos. Mencionó a las damas de honor.

—La señorita Dale, de quien habrás oído hablar a mi tía Eleanor, ha declinado por motivos de salud. Es una persona más bien mórbida, a pesar de sus cualidades realmente estimables. No hay nada malo en que no tengas más que damas de tu edad, un ramillete de jóvenes capullos, aunque con una flor que se abre en medio... Sin embargo, lo ha decidido. Mi principal fastidio es que Vernon haya rechazado ser mi padrino.

—¿El señor Whitford lo ha rechazado?

—A medias. No me ha dicho que no a mí. Su pretexto es que le disgusta la ceremonia.

—Lo comparto con él.

—Simpatizo contigo. ¡Si pudiéramos decir las palabras y perdernos de vista! Hay un modo de desprendernos del mundo; une vez lo tuve completamente; he vuelto a perderlo, como si fuera una frase cabalística que hubiera que pronunciar. Pero ¡contigo! Tú me la das para bien. Será para siempre, eternamente, Clara mía. Nada puede hacernos daño, tocarnos; somos el uno para el otro. Que el mundo luche: no tenemos nada que ver con él.

—¿Y si el señor Whitford persiste en rechazarlo?

—Tan enteramente uno que no habría peligro de influencias externas. Digamos que vuelvo a casa de caza: te veré esperándome, leeré tu corazón como si estuvieras conmigo. ¡Y sé que vuelvo a la que lee el mío! ¡Me tienes, me tienes como a un libro abierto, solo tú!

—¿Voy a estar siempre en casa? —dijo Clara, sin que él le prestara atención, y se sintió aliviada de que no la hubiera oído.

—¿Te das cuenta? ¡Somos invulnerables! El mundo no puede hacernos daño, no puede tocarnos. La felicidad es nuestra y seremos inmunes mientras la disfrutemos. ¡Algo divino! ¿Algo divino en la tierra? ¡Clara! ¡Ser el uno para el otro de modo que el mundo no se interponga! Cada día nos levantaremos para estudiar y complacernos en nuevos secretos. ¡Fuera la multitud! Ni siquiera tendremos que decirlo. Estamos en una atmósfera en la que el mundo no puede respirar.

—¡Oh el mundo! —casi canturreó Clara en un suspiro que la hundió profundamente.

Oírlo hablar como si estuviera exultante en lo alto de una montaña, cuando ella sabía que estaba en el abismo, era muy extraño y suscitaba desprecio.

—¿Mis cartas? —dijo de una manera incitante.

—Las he leído.

—Las circunstancias nos han impuesto un largo cortejo, Clara mía, y yo, lamentando tal vez las leyes del decoro (¡las lamento!), aún siento el beneficio de la iniciación gradual. No es bueno para las mujeres verse sorprendidas por una revelación repentina del carácter del hombre. También tenemos cosas que aprender: hay materia de aprendizaje en todas partes. ¿Me contarás algún día la diferencia entre lo que piensas de mí ahora y lo que pensaste cuando por primera vez...?

Un impulso de ambigua aquiescencia hizo que Clara esbozara un sollozo.

—Me atrevería a decir... que lo haré.

Añadió:

—Si es necesario.

Luego exclamó:

—¿Por qué atacas al mundo? Siempre logras que lo compadezca.

Willoughby sonrió ante su juventud.

—He pasado por esa etapa. Es lo que siento. Compadécelo, por supuesto.

—No —dijo ella—, compadecerlo, ponerme de su lado, no considerarlo tan malo. El mundo tiene faltas, los glaciares tienen grietas, las montañas tienen abismos, pero ¿no es sublime el efecto en conjunto? No ad-

mirar la montaña y el glaciar porque podrían ser crueles me parece... Y el mundo es hermoso.

—El mundo de la naturaleza, sí. ¿El mundo de los hombres?

—Sí.

—Amor mío, sospecho que estás pensando en el mundo de los salones de baile.

—Estoy pensando en el mundo que contiene generosidad real y grande, verdadero heroísmo. Lo vemos a nuestro alrededor.

—Lo leemos. ¡El mundo de los escritores de romances!

—No: el mundo vivo. Estoy segura de que nuestro deber es amarlo. Estoy segura de que nos debilitamos si no lo hacemos. Si no lo hago, quedaré expuesta a la niebla, oyendo un estallido perpetuo en lugar de música. Recuerdo haberle oído decir al señor Whitford que el cinismo es dandismo intelectual sin las plumas de la cresta y me perece que a los cínicos solo les hace felices hacer del mundo algo tan estéril como ellos se han hecho a sí mismos.

—¡El viejo Vernon! —exclamó sir Willoughby, con un semblante más bien desencajado, como si lo hubieran azotado con un guante—. Hace frases por docenas.

—Papá contradice eso y dice que es muy inteligente y muy sencillo.

—En cuanto a los cínicos, mi querida Clara, oh desde luego, desde luego, estás en lo cierto. Son ridículos, despreciables. Pero entiéndeme, quiero decir, no podemos sentir, o si la sentimos no podemos sentirla de una manera tan intensa, nuestra unidad salvo separándonos del mundo.

—¿Es un arte?

—Si lo prefieres. ¡Es nuestra poesía! Pero ¿no esquiva el amor al mundo? Dos que se aman han de encontrar su sustancia en aislamiento.

—No: se devorarán.

—Cuanto más pura sea la belleza, más lejos estarán del mundo.

—Pero no opuestos.

—Ponlo de esta manera —condescendió Willoughby—. ¿Tiene la experiencia la misma opinión del mundo que la ignorancia?

—Debería tener más caridad.

—¿Se siente la virtud a gusto en el mundo?

—Habría de ser un ejemplo en él, según la idea que yo tengo.

—¿Es el mundo grato a la santidad?

—Entonces ¿estás a favor de los monasterios?

Willoughby derramó un arroyuelo de risas sobre su cabeza que sonaban a afable compasión.

Es irritante oír eso cuando creemos que hemos dicho lo que había que decir.

—En mis cartas, Clara...

—¡No tengo memoria, Willoughby!

—Pero habrás observado que no estoy del todo en mis cartas...

—Tal vez en tus cartas a hombres.

La observación marcó una pausa en los pensamientos de Willoughby. Era de una susceptibilidad terriblemente tierna. Un solo golpe en ella reverberaba por todo su interior y se volvía furioso donde había dado; herido, especialmente donde temía que el mundo hubiera adivinado la herida. ¿Sugería ella que no tenía mano para las cartas de amor? ¿Daba a entender que las mujeres no tienen demasiado gusto para la correspondencia? Había hablado en plural, acentuando «hombres». ¿Había oído hablar de Constanza? ¿Se había formado un juicio de la criatura? La susceptibilidad sobrenatural de sir Willoughby aulló con una carcajada de afirmaciones. Había meditado a menudo sobre la obligación moral de decirle toda la verdad a Clara sobre su conducta con Constanza, para la que, como para otros suicidas, había excusas. Al menos estaba obligado a proporcionarlas. Ella se había comportado mal, pero ¿no le había dado él ningún motivo? Si era así, la virilidad lo obligaba a confesarlo.

¡Suponiendo que Clara no hubiera oído primero la versión del mundo! Los hombres cuyo orgullo es su espina dorsal sufren convulsiones cuando otros hombres apenas son conscientes de un golpe y sir Willoughby sintió accesos galvánicos en su interior al pensar en el mundo susurrándole a Clara que lo habían dejado plantado.

—¿Mis cartas a hombres, dices, amor mío?

—Tus cartas de negocios.

—¿Yo mismo por completo en mis cartas de negocios?

Se quedó con la mirada perdida.

Ella relajó la tensión de su figura al observar:

—Eres capaz de expresarte con los hombres y decir lo que quieres decir. Al escribir a... a nosotras, es, supongo, más difícil.

—Es cierto, amor mío. Yo no diría exactamente difícil. No reconozco ninguna dificultad. El lenguaje, diría yo, no es apropiado para expresar la emoción. La pasión lo rechaza.

—¿Por el mimo o la pantomima?

—No, pero escribir fríamente al respecto...

—Ah, fríamente.

—¿Te han decepcionado mis cartas?

—No he sugerido que lo hicieran.

—Mis sentimientos, querida, son demasiado fuertes para transcribirlos. Me siento, con la pluma en la mano, como el Titán mitológico en guerra con Júpiter, lo suficientemente fuerte como para arrojar montañas y no encontrando más que guijarros. El símil es bueno. No debes juzgarme por mis cartas.

—No lo hago, me gustan —dijo Clara.

Se ruborizó, lo miró rápidamente y, al verlo complaciente, retomó la conversación:

—Prefiero el guijarro a la montaña, pero si lees poesía no pensarás que el discurso humano es incapaz de...

—Amor mío, detesto el artificio. La poesía es una profesión.

—Nuestros poetas te probarían...

—Como he observado a menudo, Clara, no soy poeta.

—No te he acusado, Willoughby.

—No soy poeta ni albergo deseo de ser un poeta. Si lo fuera, mi vida proporcionaría el material, puedo asegurártelo, amor mío. Mi conciencia no está tranquila del todo. Tal vez la materia más pesada que la turba es aquella en la que menos culpable soy voluntariamente. ¿Has oído hablar de la señorita Durham?

—Sí, he oído hablar de ella.

—Tal vez sea feliz. Confío en que lo sea. Si no lo es, no puedo evitar tener algo de culpa. Un ejemplo de la diferencia entre mí mismo y el mundo, ahora. El mundo la acusa a ella. He intercedido para exonerarla.

—Eso es generoso, Willoughby.

—No sigas. Temo haber sido el primer ofensor. Pero, Clara, por sentido del honor, obrando con sentido del honor, habría mantenido mi compromiso.

—¿Qué hiciste?

—La historia es larga y empieza en un remoto día, en la «suave antigüedad de mi juventud», como dice Vernon.

—¿El señor Whitford dice eso?

—Es uno de los viejos dichos de Vernon. Es una historia de una remota fascinación.

—Papá dice que el señor Whitford habla a veces con un sabio sentido del humor.

—Intervinieron consideraciones de familia, la salud de la dama entre otras cosas, su posición en los cálculos de los parientes. Sin embargo, estaba la fascinación. Tengo que confesarlo. Motivos de celos femeninos.

—¿Ha terminado?

—¿Ahora? ¿Contigo? ¡Querida Clara! Acabado, ¿cómo podría haber abierto para ti lo más hondo de mi corazón? ¿Podría haberte hablado de mí mismo sin reservas de manera que me conozcas como yo mismo? Oh ¿habría sido posible incluirte en una unión tan íntima? ¡Secreta, inexpugnable!

—¿No le hablabas como me hablas a mí?

—En modo alguno.

—¿Qué *pudo...?* —Clara contuvo la exclamación en un murmullo.

La exposición de los últimos textos de sir Willoughby se habría vertido si un lacayo no hubiera cruzado el césped para informarle de que su constructor estaba en el laboratorio y pedía permiso para hacerle una consulta.

La súplica de Clara de un horror de conversación sobre ladrillos y viguetas la excusó de acompañarlo. Willoughby no estaba satisfecho de la conducta de Clara y no sabía por qué. La dejó, convencido de que debía hacer y decir más para alcanzar su inteligencia femenina.

Clara vio al joven Crossjay, saltando con tarros de mermelada, unirse a su patrón de un salto y, levantando los brazos, echar a correr chocando los talones. Las reflexiones de Clara eran confusas. Sir Willoughby era admirable con el muchacho. «¿Se tratará de dos hombres?», pensó, y el pensamiento seguía: «¿Soy injusta?». Echó a correr hacia el joven Crossjay para distraerse.

VIII

Una escapada con el alumno que hace novillos, un paseo con el maestro

La vista de la señorita Middleton corriendo inflamó al joven Crossjay con la pasión del juego de la persecución. Gritó desaforadamente y salió disparado. Ella era rápida, corría como si cien piececillos la empujaran hacia delante con la suavidad del agua sobre el césped y las extensiones de hierba del parque, tan ágilmente el escondido par se multiplicaba para darle velocidad. Tan dulce era en sus pasos que el muchacho, como correspondía a su edad, transformó la admiración en un frenesí tenaz para perseguirla y perseveró en él, lejos de aventajarla, determinado a ganar la carrera o morir. De repente la huida de Clara llegó a su final con una docena de trotes y se detuvo. El joven Crossjay la alcanzó con el aliento suficiente para decirle:

—¡Es usted una corredora!

—Se me olvidó que estabas tomando el té, mi pobre muchacho —dijo ella.

—¡Ni siquiera jadea! —fue su encomio.

—Querido, no, no más que un pájaro. Como si trataras de coger a un pájaro.

El joven Crossjay asintió.

—Espere a que coja aire.

—Debes confesar que las chicas corren más rápido que los chicos.

—Al principio tal vez.

—Lo hacen todo mejor.

—Son un chasco.

—Aprenden sus lecciones.

—Pero no puedes hacer de ellas soldados ni marineros.

—Eso no es cierto. ¿No has oído hablar de Mary Ambree? ¿Ni de la señorita Hannah Snell, de Pondicherry? Y ahí está la novia del célebre William Taylor. ¡Y qué dices de Juana de Arco? ¿Qué dices de Boadicea? Supongo que no has oído hablar de las amazonas [24] .

—No eran inglesas.

—Entonces, señor, ¡es que solo execráis a vuestras compatriotas!

El joven Crossjay delató la ansiedad de su falsa posición y le pidió que le contara las historias de Mary Ambree y las demás que fueran inglesas.

—¡Fíjate, no lees por ti mismo, te escondes y haces novillos con el señor Whitford y la consecuencia es que no conoces la historia de tu país!

La señorita Middleton lo rechazó, disfrutando de verlo retorcerse entre la percepción de cómo se divertía ella y el reconocimiento de su falta. Ella le pidió que le contara cuál era el glorioso día de Valentín de nuestros anales navales, el nombre del héroe del día y el nombre de su barco. Sus respuestas a estas preguntas fueron tan rápidas como los cañonazos del buen barco *Captain* al español de cuatro cubiertas [25] .

—Se lo debes al señor Whitford —dijo la señorita Middleton.

—Me compra los libros —gruñó el joven Crossjay y, recogiendo hojas de hierba, las mordió, previendo oscura, pero certeramente el final de todo aquello.

La señorita Middleton se tumbó en la hierba y dijo:

—¿Me tendrás cariño, Crossjay?

El muchacho se sentó parpadeando. Deseaba probarle que ya sentía por ella un cariño desmesurado y se habría cogido a su cuello si ella se hubiera sentado, pero verla recostada con los párpados medio cerrados lo excitó hasta la perplejidad y el espanto. Su joven corazón latía con fuerza.

—Porque, mi querido muchacho —dijo, apoyándose en el codo—, eres un muchacho encantador, pero desagradecido, y no hay historia si no castigas a quien se ocupa de ti. Ven conmigo, cógeme algunas de esas prímulas y las verónicas que están junto a ellas; creo que a los dos nos gustan las flores silvestres.

Se levantó y lo cogió del brazo.

—Remarás para mí en el lago mientras te hablo en serio.

Pero fue ella quien cogió los remos en el bote, pues había sido una compañera de juegos de los muchachos y sabía que si uno de ellos se dedica a un ejercicio viril no es probable que escuche a una mujer.

—Ahora, Crossjay —dijo. Una densa oscuridad lo cubrió como una capucha. Ella cruzó las manos para reírse.

—¡Como si fuera a darte una reprimenda, bobo!

El joven Crossjay comenzó a iluminarse vacilantemente.

—Me gustaban tanto los nidos como a ti. Me gustan los chicos valientes y me gustaría que entraras en la marina real. Pero ¿cómo vas a poder si no aprendes? Ya sabes que los capitanes han de aprobarte. Alguien te ha malcriado: la señorita Dale o el señor Whitford.

—¡Sí! —confesó el joven Crossjay.

—¿Lo hace sir Willoughby?

—No me ha malcriado. Puedo acercarme a él.

—Estoy segura de que es muy amable contigo. Diría que crees que el señor Whitford es más bien severo. Recuerda que ha de enseñarte, de manera que puedas entrar en la marina. No debes disgustarte con él porque te haga trabajar. ¡Imagínate que te hubieras herido hoy! Habría sido mejor que pensaras en trabajar con el señor Whitford.

—Sir Willoughby dice que, cuando se case, usted no me dejará esconderme.

—¡Ah! No está bien domar a un muchacho tan grande como tú. ¿No te da lo que tú llamas propinas?

—Generalmente piezas de media corona. Tuve una pieza de una corona y he tenido soberanos.

—¿Y por eso haces lo que te pide? Te consiente porque tú... Bueno, aunque el señor Whitford no te dé dinero, te da su tiempo, trata de que vayas a la marina.

—Paga por mí.

—¿Qué has dicho?

—Mi sustento. Para complacerle, si estuviera en el fondo del agua aquí, me sumergiría a buscarlo. Me propongo aprender. A las seis de la mañana estamos aquí los dos, cuando está despejado, y nadamos. Me ha enseñado. Es solo que no me preocupo por los libros de texto.

—¿Estás seguro de que el señor Whitford paga por ti?

—Me lo dijo mi padre y que debo obedecerlo. Oyó que mi padre era pobre, con familia. Fue a ver a mi padre. Mi padre vino aquí una vez y sir Willoughby no quiso verlo. Sé que el señor Whitford lo hace y la señorita Dale me dijo que lo hacía. Mi madre dice que lo hace para compensarnos por la caminata de mi padre bajo la lluvia y el resfriado que cogió al venir aquí, a Patterne.

—Ya ves que no debes causarle molestias, Crossjay. Es un buen amigo para tu padre y para ti. Debes quererlo.

—Me gusta y me gusta su cara.

—¿Por qué su cara?

—¡No es como las demás! La señorita Dale y yo hablamos de él. Ella cree que sir Willoughby es el hombre más apuesto que haya nacido.

—¿No estabas hablando del señor Whitford?

—Sí, el viejo Vernon. Así es como lo llama sir Willoughby —se excusó el joven Crossjay ante su mirada de sorpresa—. ¿Sabe en lo que me hacen pensar? Me refiero a sus ojos. Me hace pensar en la vieja cabra de la caverna de Robinson Crusoe. Me gusta porque siempre es el mismo y no siempre estamos seguros de la gente. Señorita Middleton, si se fija en el críquet, solo puede fiarse de un hombre por cada diez carreras. Él puede hacer más y nunca hace menos, y tendría que oír hablar de él a los granjeros. Eso es lo que siento.

La señorita Middleton entendió que alguna ilustración del campo de críquet trataba de arrojar luz sobre lo que el muchacho sentía por el señor Whitford. Era evidente que el joven Crossjay hablaba de corazón. Pero el sol estaba bajo, tenía que vestirse para cenar y se despidió de él con pesar, como al final de un día de fiesta. Antes de separarse, el muchacho se ofreció a atravesar el lago a nado vestido o a sumergirse hasta el fondo para encontrar lo que ella arrojara, declarando solemnemente que no se perdería.

Clara volvió lentamente, canturreando para sí misma pensamientos sombríos, como el carricero en la rama junto a la corriente de la noche, una sencilla canción desenfadada, independiente de la oscilante y oscura corriente que discurría por debajo.

Oyó acercarse a alguien.

—Veo que ha estado mimando a mi bribonzuelo.

—¡Señor Whitford! Sí; mimándolo no, espero. He tratado de darle una lección. Es un buen chico, pero me imagino que díscolo.

Clara tenía el color del atardecer, incapaz de detener el arrobo. Dijo que había estado remando y, al dirigirse a sus ojos, como acostumbraba, penetrantemente, se defendió fijando su mente en la vieja cabra de Robinson Crusoe en los recovecos de la caverna.

—He de llevármelo pronto de aquí —dijo Vernon—. Aquí está demasiado protegido. Hablaré de él con Willoughby. No sé qué piensa del futuro del muchacho, pero la oportunidad de ingresar en la marina no permite dilaciones y, si hay un muchacho nacido para la marina, ese es Crossjay.

El incidente de la explosión en el laboratorio fue una novedad para Vernon.

—¿Willoughby se rio? —dijo—. Hay examinadores en los puertos para los jóvenes y tendremos que en-

viar al muchacho al mejor que podamos encontrar. Preferiría que hubiera estado conmigo estos últimos tres meses y asegurarme de que algunas cosas arraiguen en su cabeza. Pero aquí se está echando a perder y yo me voy. Así que ya no lo fastidiaré muchas semanas más. ¿Se encuentra bien el doctor Middleton?

—Mi padre está bien, sí. Se cernió como un halcón sobre sus notas en la biblioteca.

Vernon soltó una risita.

—Las dejé para atraerlo. Es una controversia.

—Mi padre no le ha perdonado, a juzgar por su mirada.

—Conozco la mirada.

—¿Ha caminado hasta muy lejos?

—Nueve horas y media. Mi cabeza de chorlito es demasiado para mí en ocasiones y tengo que despejarme.

Ella lo miró, pensando en el placer de tratar con un carácter honradamente jovial y resueltamente dispuesto a un específico.

—¿Hacían falta tantas horas?

—No tantas.

—Se está preparando para su viaje alpino.

—Es dudoso que vaya este año a los Alpes. Dejo la casa y probablemente esté en Londres con mi pluma en venta.

—¿Sabe Willoughby que lo deja?

—Tanto como el Mont Blanc sabe que un grupo en la ladera se dispone a escalarlo. Ve una mota o dos en el valle.

—No ha hablado de ello.

—Lo atribuirá a cambios...

Vernon no acabó la frase.

Ella se quedó sin aliento, sin emoción, pero contenida por las barreras sintió el impulso de preguntar qué cambios.

Se detuvo a coger una prímula.

—He visto asfódelos al final del parque —dijo—. Uno o dos. Casi se han marchitado.

—Tenemos muchas flores silvestres aquí —contestó.

—No lo deje, señor Whitford.

—No me quiere.

—Usted es su devoto.

—No lo pretendo.

—Entonces ¿son los cambios que usted imagina...? Si no ocurre ninguno, ¿por qué ha de marcharse?

—Bueno, tengo treinta y dos años y nunca he estado en la refriega: una clase no descrita, medio erudito y, por naturaleza, medio recadero o arquero o mosquetero; si soy digno de algo, Londres es mi campo. Es lo que debo probar.

—A papá no le gustará que se sirva de su pluma en Londres; dirá que vale para mucho más.

—Hay hombres buenos allí; no me importaría que me clasificaran por encima de ellos.

—Se han echado a perder, dice.

—¡Error! Si tienen ambición privada, pueden suponer que se han echado a perder. Pero no entiendo qué valor tiene para el mundo una ambición privada.

—¿No tiene una mala opinión del mundo? —dijo la señorita Middleton, con el corazón oprimido mientras hablaba y la sensación de haberse proporcionado a sí misma una gota de veneno.

El señor Whitford replicó:

—Por la misma razón podríamos tener una mala opinión de un río: aquí está turbio, allí claro; un día revuelto, otro plácido. Hemos de tratarlo con sentido común.

—¿Lo ama?

—En el sentido de servirlo.

—¿No cree que es hermoso?

—En parte; en parte es lo contrario.

—Papá citaría la *mulier formosa*.

—Salvo que *pez* es demasiado bueno para la extremidad oscura. *Mujer* es excelente para la superior.

—¿Por qué dice eso? Creo que no lo dice cínicamente. Su opinión se dirige a mi razón [26] .

Estaba agradecida con él por no haberlo afirmado en un contraste ideal con la opinión de sir Willoughby. Si lo hubiera hecho, su sangre joven habría deseado tan intensamente enamorarse del mundo que sintió que él la habría elevado sobre sus pies. Por un momento se había abierto entre ellos un golfo. Cuando dijo «¿Lo ama?», un poco de entusiasmo la habría desplazado al espacio con tanta fiereza como el vino, pe-

ro el sobrio «en el sentido de servirlo» penetró en su cerebro y fue un motivo de reflexión sobre ello y sobre él.

Podía pensar en él con una agradable libertad, que el instinto femenino de peligro no corrigió. No tenía artes ni gracias, nada de la cómoda fachada social de su primo. Una vez había sido testigo de la precisión militar de su baile y había tenido que aprender a apreciarlo antes de dejar de rezar para no ser víctima de ello como pareja. Caminaba heroicamente y era famoso su vigor pedestre, pero eso aludía a quien se aleja del sexo y no se prodiga en las recreaciones en las que hombres y mujeres unen sus manos. Tampoco era un jinete. Sir Willoughby disfrutaba viéndolo a caballo. No podía decirse que brillara en la sala de estar, salvo cuando se sentaba con alguien dispuesto a conversar de verdad. Más que sus méritos, sus defectos lo señalaban como un hombre que fuera amigo de una joven que lo necesitara. Su modo de vida dibujó en su turbado espíritu una envidiable uniformidad y consideró una muestra de fortaleza haber logrado ese proceder uniforme, y ella deseaba apoyar una idea sobre una fortaleza amistosa. Su reputación de indiferencia hacia los frívolos encantos de las muchachas lo investía de una noble frialdad y le daba la distinción de un iceberg visto de lejos en los mares del sur. La noción popular de una aristocracia hereditaria se parecía a lo que ella sentía por un hombre que no adulaba al sexo femenino ni podía ser adulado por él; parecía superior incluso hasta el espanto. Ella era joven, pero sus oídos habían sido bastante adulados y había quedado atrapada, y él, al desdeñar la práctica del pajarero o arrojar un pensamiento sobre las pequeñas aves, le pareció dotado de un orgullo basado en una elevación natural.

Habían dejado de hablar durante un rato cuando Vernon dijo abruptamente:

—El futuro del muchacho depende de usted, señorita Middleton. Me propongo marcharme lo antes posible y no me gusta que esté aquí sin mí, aunque usted cuidará de él, no me cabe la menor duda. Pero tal vez al principio no vea dónde lo perjudican los mimos. Debería ser enviado enseguida a los examinadores, antes de que usted se convierta en lady Patterne. Use su influencia. Willoughby respaldará al muchacho si usted se lo pide. El coste no puede ser grande. Hay fuertes razones para no tenerlo conmigo en Londres, aunque yo pudiera arreglarlo. ¿Puedo contar con usted?

—Lo mencionaré. Haré lo que esté en mi mano —dijo la señorita Middleton, extrañamente abatida.

Habían alcanzado el césped, donde sir Willoughby paseaba con las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel, sus tías.

—Pareces haber perseguido la liebre y cazado al ciervo —le dijo a su prometida.

—Comenzó con el pupilo y terminó con el pedagogo —dijo Vernon.

—Ay no me has hecho caso respecto al cuidado de ese muchacho —replicó sir Willoughby.

Las señoras abrazaron a la señorita Middleton. Una ofreció sus elogios por su aspecto, la otra por su salud; luego las dos observaron que con indulgencia el joven Crossjay podía ser inducido a hacer cualquier cosa. Clara se preguntó si la inclinación o sir Willoughby habían disciplinado la individualidad de sus tías y las había convertido en sus sombras, sus ecos. Pasó de ellas a él y le tuvo miedo. Pero aún no había experimentado el poder que había en él para amenazar y someter a los miembros de su casa al estado de satélites. Aunque lo había combatido durante meses, conservaba el suyo para percibir con claridad el carácter del espíritu que se oponía al suyo.

Les dijo a las señoras:

—¡Ah no! El señor Whitford ha escogido el único método para enseñar a un muchacho como Crossjay.

—Me propongo hacer un hombre de él —dijo sir Willoughby.

—¿Qué va a ser de él si no aprende nada?

—Si me complace, será provisto. Nunca he abandonado a un dependiente.

Clara dejó que sus ojos reposaran en él y, sin volverlos ni dejarlos caer, los cerró.

El efecto fue incómodo para él. Era muy sensible a las intenciones de ojos y tonos, lo que era un secreto de su rígida comprensión de los moradores de su casa. Les habían enseñado que tenían que prestar asentimiento bajo un agudo escrutinio. Unos ojos estudiosos, desprovistos de calidez, desprovistos de la timidez de su sexo, que se cerraban de repente al mirarlos, significaban una falta de comprensión de algún tipo, tal vez una hostilidad de entendimiento. ¿Era posible que no la poseyera por completo? Frunció el ceño.

Clara vio cómo arqueaba las cejas y pensó: «Mi mente es mía, casada o no».

Ese era el punto de discusión.

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24 Mary Ambree y la novia de William Taylor son personajes de baladas; Hannah Snell es un personaje histórico de las luchas inglesas en la India durante el siglo XVIII . Boadicea es el nombre de una reina britana que luchó contra los romanos.

25 El 14 de febrero de 1797, sir John Jervis ganó la batalla del Cabo de san Vicente, ayudado por Nelson, que estaba al mando del *Captain* .

26 Alusión al *Arte poética* de Horacio: «*... ut turpiter atrum / Desinat in piscem mulier Formosa superne*» (3-4).

IX

Clara y Leticia se encuentran: comparación

A la mañana siguiente, una hora antes de la señalada para las lecciones, el joven Crossjay estaba en el césped con un gran ramillete de flores silvestres. Las dejó en la puerta de la casa para la señorita Middleton y se desvaneció entre los arbustos.

Los sirvientes de la casa habrían barrido esas hierbas vulgares como un montón de polvo, pero como sucedió que la señorita Middleton las había visto desde la ventana en las manos de Crossjay, fue posible descubrir que eran su ramo de visita y un lacayo recibió órdenes de llevárselas. Estaba muy complacida. El arreglo de las flores ponía de relieve unos dedos más delicados que los del muchacho en la disposición de los anillos de color, silenes y anémonas rojas, prímulas y verónicas, onagras y jacintos; del azul se destacaba una rama de floración blanca, tan abundante y de un blanco tan puro que la señorita Middleton, mientras alababa a Crossjay por solicitar la ayuda de la señorita Dale, no lograba dar con el nombre.

—El jardinero ha mejorado a la vestal del bosque, el cerezo silvestre —dijo el doctor Middleton—, y, en este caso, hemos de admitir como válida la exigencia del jardinero, aunque yo creo que, con su don de la doble floración, ha malogrado el fruto. La llamaremos la vestal de la civilización; al menos ha hecho algo para defender tanto la belleza del oficio como la precisión del título.

—El joven bribón ha saqueado el Árbol Sagrado de Vernon —dijo alegremente sir Willoughby.

La señorita Middleton fue informada de que el señor Whitford cultivaba ese cerezo silvestre de doble floración.

Sir Willoughby prometió que la llevaría verlo.

—Soportarás la prueba; pocos semblantes pueden hacerlo: para la mayoría de las señoras es una prueba más cruel que la nieve —le dijo—. La señorita Dale, por ejemplo, se convierte en encaje a unas docenas de yardas de allí. Me gustaría verla sentada bajo el árbol a tu lado.

—Pero, querido, eso es darle a la hamadríade nuevas y terribles funciones —exclamó el doctor Middleton.

Clara dijo:

—La señorita Dale podría arrastrarme a una corte superior para enseñarme a desaparecer a su lado con dotes más valiosas que un semblante.

—Tiene una hermosa habilidad —dijo Vernon.

Todo el mundo conocía, y por eso Clara la conocía, la romántica admiración de la señorita Dale por sir Willoughby; sentía curiosidad por ver a la señorita Dale y estudiar la naturaleza de una devoción que podría ser razonablemente imitable: ¿por un hombre que hablaba con semejante frialdad de la pobre dama a la que había fascinado? Bueno, tal vez la escarcha sea mejor para los corazones de las mujeres: corregidas, reprimidas, devueltas a sus sueños. Sí, la frialdad de ese hombre era deseable; alentaba un ideal de sí mismo. Sugería y parecía proponerle a Clara la divinidad de la separación en lugar de la exactitud mortal de una íntima lectura. Trató de contemplarlo como la señorita Dale podría contemplarlo y, aunque en parte la despreció por la ingenuidad que envidiaba, y más que criticarlo por el entumecimiento inhumano de sus sentimientos que ofrecía a su culto una comparación complementaria, imaginó una distancia desde la que podría observarlo sin criticarlo, amablemente, con admiración, como la luna a un mortal encantador, por ejemplo.

En medio de sus pensamientos, se sorprendió a sí misma diciendo:

—Desde luego yo fui difícil de instruir. Podría ver las cosas más claras si tuviera una hermosa habilidad; no recuerdo que me haya complacido perfectamente en una lección inmediata...

Se detuvo, preguntándose si su lengua tiraba de ella; luego añadió, para salvarse:

—Y por eso seguramente le tengo afecto al pobre Crossjay.

Aparentemente, el señor Whitford no juzgó memorable que hablara de «una hermosa habilidad», aunque la frase elogiosa la hubiera pronunciado él de una manera tan impresionante que hizo sensible a su oído para el eco.

Sir Willoughby dispersó la vaporosa confusión de Clara.

—Exactamente —dijo—. Le he insistido a Vernon, no sé con cuánta frecuencia, en que hay que ganarse el afecto del muchacho. No soporta que lo dirijan. No surte efecto conmigo. Los muchachos vigorosos son así, Creo que conozco a los muchachos, Clara.

Se encontró a sí mismo dirigiéndose a unos ojos que lo miraban como si fuese una motita, una cabeza

de alfiler, en el círculo de su remota contemplación. Eran grandes; se cerraron.

Clara los abrió para mirar hacia otra parte.

Él era muy sensible.

Incluso entonces, hiriéndolo a sabiendas, o a causa de ello, Clara trataba de ascender hasta la altura de la tenue división del terreno neutral desde el que vemos las faltas de un enamorado y estamos por encima de ellas, observadores puros. Ascendió sin éxito, es cierto; pronto se desesperó y usó el esfuerzo como un pretexto para descender.

El doctor Middleton desvió la atención de sir Willoughby del imperceptible fastidio.

—No, sir, no: ¡la vara, la vara! Los muchachos vigorosos se vuelven por lo común hombres sólidos y, cuanto más sólidos, más seguro es que prefieran a Busby [27] . En lo que a mí respecta, ruego que sea inmortal en Gran Bretaña. Ni el aire del mar ni el de la montaña son tan estimulantes. Me atrevo a decir que el poder de recibir una buena tunda es más digno que el poder de administrarla. Sentadlo a horcajadas y azotadlo si Crossjay huye de sus libros.

—¿Es esa su opinión, señor? —su anfitrión se inclinó ante él afablemente, perplejo a causa de las señoras.

—Absolutamente, señor; tanto que, sin conocer los antecedentes, pondría el dedo sobre los hombres de la vida pública que no han tenido a tiempo su Busby. Serán hombres mal equilibrados. El asiento de su razón no será concreto. No se tomarán las cosas con calma. Harán mala sangre, no podrán perdonar, suplicarán aprobación a derecha e izquierda y se excitarán hasta la ira si el viento del este no los adula. Cuando hayan crecido, sir, encontrarán a esos hombres mezclados con el sinsentido de su juventud; verán que no se han cultivado. Nosotros, los ingleses, batimos el mundo porque aceptamos la vara. Considero que es una seguridad para la dulzura adecuada de la sangre.

La sonrisa de sir Willoughby se hizo aún más suave conforme las sacudidas de su cabeza acrecentaban la contradicción.

—Sin embargo —dijo, con el aire de conceder algo después de haber respondido al reverendo doctor e imputarle el error—, Jack requiere mantenerlo a raya. A bordo podrá aplicarse su argumento. Sospecho que no entre caballeros. No.

—¡Buenas noches a sus caballeros! —dijo el doctor Middleton.

Clara oyó que la señorita Eleanor y la señorita Isabel intercambiaban observaciones.

—¡Willoughby no lo habría soportado!

—¡Lo habría alterado por completo!

Suspiró y se mordió el labio inferior. El don de la fantasía humorística en las mujeres está señalado con carteles intimidatorios. Tienen que sofocarla; si perciben una pieza de humor, por ejemplo, el joven Willoughby cogido por su maestro y sus parientes horrorizados a la vista de los preparativos del sacrilegio, tienen que vendarse los ojos. Son la infantería duramente adiestrada de la sociedad, prusianos que deben marchar y marcar el paso. Si queréis, es en aras del mundo civilizado, puesto que los hombres lo han decretado o las matronas han leído el decreto de ese modo; pero aquí y allá una mujer más joven, accidentalmente una insurgente incorregible del sexo maduro aquí y allá, sentirá que su suerte estaba echada con su cabeza en un hoyo más estrecho que sus extremidades.

Clara especuló con que la señorita Dale fuera tal vez una persona de cierta libertad de espíritu. Pedía un poco, muy poco, del libre juego del espíritu en una casa que parecía llevar, por decirlo así, una capucha de hierro. Sir Willoughby no solo gobernaba, reinaba, inspiraba: ¿cómo? Clara se había dado cuenta de una irascible suspicacia en él, alerta ante cualquier sombra de desacuerdo e, igual que era amable cuando se apaciguaba, ofrecía una concesión por sumisión. Se dio cuenta de que incluso el señor Whitford se abstenía de alarmar el sentimiento de autoridad en su primo. Si no respiraba el aire de sir Willoughby, como las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel, consentía con una sílaba o se callaba. Nunca disentía abiertamente. Llevaba el hábito de la casa, con su capucha de hierro, como lo llevaban los sirvientes y, ¡oh estremecimientos de los náufragos que saben que van a ahogarse!, lo llevaría su esposa.

—¿Cuándo conoceré a la señorita Dale? —preguntó.

—Esta misma tarde, en la cena —contestó sir Willoughby.

Entonces, pensó ella, habrá que esperar.

Se consintió su mórbido impulso y se concentró en vivir por anticipado el encuentro con la señorita Dale y, mucho antes de que se acercara la hora, su esperanza de encontrar algo distinto a una estúpida partidaria de sir Willoughby se había disipado. Hacía dos o tres minutos que estaba sentada lánguidamente a solas con Leticia en la sala de estar, antes de que se reunieran las señoras.

—¿Es usted la señorita Middleton? —dijo Leticia, avanzando hacia ella—. Mis celos me lo dicen, pues se ha ganado usted el corazón de mi Crossjay y ha hecho más por lograr que obedezca en unos minutos que nosotros en meses.

—Sus flores silvestres me gustaron mucho —dijo Clara.

—Fue muy modesto con ellas. Lo menciono porque los chicos de su edad suelen arrojarnos sus regalos a la cara cuando lo recogen y la trató a usted de un modo muy distinto.

—Vimos su buena intención.

—Dejaré el cargo, pero le ruego que no lo mime demasiado a cambio, pues tiene que marcharse con quienes lo prepararán para los exámenes. Todos pensamos que es un marinero nato y que su lugar está en la marina.

—Pero, señorita Dale, lo quiero tanto que consultaré sus intereses y no mi propio egoísmo. Si tengo influencia, no pasará una semana más con usted. Debería haberse hablado hoy; debo haber estado soñando. Pienso en ello, lo sé. No olvidaré hacer lo que esté en mi poder.

El corazón de Clara se hundió con el renovado compromiso y el apuro de pedir un favor, urgir algún tipo de petición. La causa era buena. Además, ya había pasado por apuros.

—Sir Willoughby está encariñado de verdad con el muchacho —dijo.

—Está encariñado con excitar el cariño del muchacho —dijo la señorita Dale—. No ha tratado mucho con ellos. Estoy segura de que le gusta Crossjay; de otro modo no sería tan indulgente. Es sorprendente lo que soporta y de lo que se ríe.

Sir Willoughby entró. La presencia de la señorita Dale lo iluminó como las velas brillan en un lugar consagrado. Respetándola profundamente por su constancia, estimándola como un modelo de gusto, no estaba nunca en su compañía sin la conciencia dichosa de resplandecer que saca a la luz los tesoros del hombre, y no es una exageración llamarla ilimitada cuando todo lo que sale de él se toma por oro.

El efecto de la tarde sobre Clara fue hacer que desconfiara de su antagonismo previo. Sin darse cuenta había pasado al espíritu de la señorita Dale, en ayuda de sir Willoughby, pues podía simpatizar con la perspectiva de su constante admiradora al verlo tan cordial y delicadamente alegre; podríamos decir que domésticamente ingenioso, la forma más agradable del ingenio. La señora Mountstuart Jenkinson discernió que tenía una pierna de perfección física; la señorita Dale lo distinguió en la esencia vital y ante cualquiera de estas damas no solo era una criatura radiante, sino productiva: tan cierto es que la alabanza es nuestro sol fructificador. Tenía incluso un toque de aire romántico que Clara recordaba como su primera impresión del favorito del condado y le pareció extraño observar esta idea resucitada en contraste con su experiencia. ¿Y si había sido capciosa, desconsiderada? ¡Oh bendita reminiscencia de la sensación de paz! La felicidad del dolor pasado era todo lo que buscaba y su concepción de la libertad consistía en aprender a amar sus cadenas, suponiendo que eso le ahorrase las caricias. Con ese estado de ánimo condenó severamente a Constanza. «Hemos de intentar hacer el bien; no hemos de pensar en nosotros mismos; hemos de alcanzar lo mejor en nuestro paso por la vida». Revolvió esos preceptos infantiles con humilde seriedad y, para no demorarse en su esfuerzo por hacer el bien, con un remoto pero agradable atisbo de que el señor Whitford la oía, aprovechó la oportunidad para hablar con sir Willoughby del asunto del joven Crossjay en un momento en el que, al bajar del caballo, se había mostrado en ventaja entre una galante compañía al galope. Había demostrado su ventaja a caballo entre los hombres, siempre el mejor montado, y tenía un estilo caballeresco, posiblemente cultivado, pero efectivo. A pie, su cabeza erguida y sus párpados semicaídos asumían de una manera demasiado palpable su superioridad.

—Willoughby, quiero hablar —dijo ella, encogiéndose conforme hablaba para que él concediera inmediatamente todo por cortesía y le diera alivio—. Quiero hablar del querido Crossjay. Le tienes cariño. Está más bien ocioso aquí y perdiendo el tiempo...

—Ahora estás aquí y cuando estás aquí para bien, amor mío, para bien... —dijo deshaciéndose en encantos, olvidándose de Crossjay, sobre quien volvió enseguida—. El muchacho ha reconocido a su soberana y hará lo que le pidas, aunque le ordenes que aprenda sus lecciones. ¿Quién no obedecería? Tu belleza es una orden. Pero ¿qué hay más allá? Una gracia, una huella divina, que te sitúa no solo por encima sino aparte, separada del mundo.

Clara sonrió por deber y siguió:

—Si Crossjay fuera enviado enseguida a alguna casa donde preparan a los chicos para entrar en la marina tendría su oportunidad, pues la marina es claramente su profesión. Su padre es un valiente y él ha heredado la valentía y le apasiona la vida de marinero, pero tiene que ser capaz de pasar los exámenes y no tiene mucho tiempo.

Sir Willoughby se rió ligeramente con la triste diversión.

—Mi querida Clara, adoras el mundo y supongo que tendrás que aprender que no hay en este porfiado mundo una sola cuestión que no podamos discutir *ad nauseam* . Tengo mis ideas sobre Crossjay, Vernon tiene las suyas. Me gustaría hacer de él un caballero. Vernon lo ha señalado como marinero. Pero Vernon es el protector del muchacho, no yo. Vernon lo tomó de su padre para instruirlo y tiene derecho a decir qué se ha de hacer con él. No interfiero. Pero no puedo impedir que el chico me guste. El viejo Vernon parece darse

cuenta. Te aseguro que no me meto. Si, a pesar de no aprobar los planes de Vernon para el muchacho, me piden que suscriba su partida, no puedo sino encogerme de hombros, porque, como verás, no me he opuesto. El viejo Vernon paga por él, es el maestro, él decide y, si Crossjay resbala del mástil en una galerna, la culpa no recaerá sobre mí. Querida, estas son cuestiones de razón.

—No me atrevería a entrar en ellas —dijo Clara— si no hubiera sospechado que el dinero...

—Sí —exclamó Willoughby—, y es una parte. Si el viejo Vernon me entregara al muchacho, inmediatamente lo aliviaría de la carga de su bolsa. ¿Puedo hacer eso, querida mía, para continuar con un plan que condeno? El asunto es este: invité al capitán Patterne a visitarme; justo antes de su partida a la costa africana, donde el gobierno despacha a los marines cuando no hay otro medio de matarlos, le envié una invitación especial. Me lo agradeció y declinó cortésmente. El hombre, casi podría decir, es pensionista mío. Bueno, se considera un Patterne, es indudablemente un hombre valiente, tiene elementos de nuestra sangre y el nombre. Creo que yo no debería ser censurado por desear hacer un caballero mejor del hijo de lo que veo en el padre y al ver que esa vida, desde una temprana edad, a bordo de un barco no ha hecho del padre un caballero, sostengo que estoy en lo cierto al imaginar otro rumbo para el hijo.

—Los oficiales navales... —sugirió Clara.

—Algunos —dijo Willoughby—. Pero han de ser hombres de nacimiento, salidos de hogares de buena crianza. Despójalos del halo del título de oficiales de marina y me temo que no los llamaríamos con la misma frecuencia caballeros cuando entraran en un salón. Voy tan lejos como para suponer que tengo algún derecho a hacer del joven Crossjay algo distinto. Puede hacerse: el Patterne sale en su conducta contigo, amor mío; puede hacerse. Pero si me hago cargo de él, exijo una influencia indiscutible sobre él. No puedo hacer un caballero del muchacho si he de competir con esta o aquella persona. En suma, debe contemplarme, debe tener un modelo.

—Entonces ¿te harás cargo de él a partir de ahora?

—De acuerdo con su conducta.

—¿No será eso precario para él?

—¿Más que la profesión que parecías inclinada a elegir para él?

—Pero allí estaría sometido a regulaciones claras.

—Conmigo tendrá que responder al afecto.

—¿Le asegurarás unos ingresos fijos? Un caballero ocioso es bastante malo, pero un caballero sin un penique...

—Solo tiene que complacerme, querida, y encontrará protección.

—Pero ¿y si no tiene éxito en complacerte?

—¿Es tan difícil?

—¡Oh! —Clara se estremeció.

—Ya ves, amor mío, que te contesto —dijo sir Willoughby.

Y resumió:

—Pero que el viejo Vernon ponga a prueba al muchacho. Tiene sus propias ideas. Que las lleve adelante. Estaré atento al experimento.

Clara estaba a punto de dejar el asunto por pura debilidad.

—¿No es una cuestión de dinero? —dijo tímidamente, sabiendo que el señor Whitford era pobre.

—El viejo Vernon ha escogido gastar su dinero de ese modo —replicó sir Willoughby—. Si eso lo salva de romperse las espinillas y arriesgar su cuello en los Alpes, lo daremos por bien empleado.

—Sí —la voz de Clara duró una pausa.

Cogió su languidez como si fuera una serpiente enroscada y la arrojó.

—Pero tengo entendido que el señor Whitford necesita tu ayuda. ¿No es...? No es rico. Cuando deje la casa para probar fortuna con la literatura en Londres no podrá ser tan capaz de darle su apoyo a Crossjay y obtener la instrucción necesaria para el muchacho, y sería generoso ayudarlo.

—¡Dejar la casa! —exclamó Willoughby—. No he oído ni una palabra al respecto. Hizo un mal inicio y yo habría dicho que lo había sosegado: tenía que dejar plantado a su camarada; ejem. Luego recibió un pequeño legado hace algún tiempo y quiso marcharse para probar suerte con la literatura: una jugada sucia, le dije. Convertirse en londinense no le hará bien. Hace años que pensé en ese absurdo. ¿Qué tiene conmigo? Unas ciento cincuenta libras al año y podría doblarlas con pedirlo, y todos los libros que quiera, y todos esos escritores y eruditos, en cuanto piensan en un libro, quieren tenerlo. No creas que me quejo. Soy un hombre que no deja que quienes sirven a mi persona gasten un solo chelín. Confieso ser riguroso en esa clase de dependencia. El feudalismo no es nada objetable si estás seguro del señor. Ya sabes, Clara, y deberías conocer también mi debilidad, que no exijo servidumbre; estipulo afecto. Pretendo estar rodeado por personas que me amen. ¿Por una? ¡La más querida! Así que podemos dejar fuera el mundo: vivimos lo que para otros es un sueño. No podemos imaginar nada más dulce. Es un verdadero cielo en la tierra. ¡Ser el propieta-

rio de todo lo que tú eres! Tus pensamientos, esperanzas, todo.

Sir Willoughby intensificó su imaginación para concebir más: no podía, o no podía expresarlo, y siguió:

—Pero ¿qué es todo eso de que Vernon me deja? No puede dejarme. Apenas tiene un centenar de libras al año suyas. Ya ves que lo tengo en consideración. No hablo de la ingratitud del deseo de dejarme. Ya sabes, querida, que aborrezco mortalmente las despedidas y cosas por el estilo. Hasta donde puedo, me rodeo de gente sana especialmente para protegerme de herir mis sentimientos y, salvo la señorita Dale, que te gusta, cariño, ¿te gusta? —la respuesta lo satisfizo—, con esa excepción, no soy consciente de un caso que me atormente. ¡Y ahora hay alguien que, sin ninguna compulsión, habla de dejar la casa! En el nombre de la bondad, ¿por qué? Pero ¿por qué? ¿He de imaginar que la vista de la felicidad perfecta lo turba? Nos dicen que el mundo está «desesperadamente enfermo». No me gusta pensarlo de mis amigos; sin embargo, de otro modo su conducta es difícil de explicar.

—Si fuera cierto, ¿no castigarías a Crossjay? —interpuso débilmente Clara.

—Me haría cargo de Crossjay y haría de él un hombre a mi imagen, querida. Pero ¿quién te ha hablado de esto?

—El propio señor Whitford. Permíteme que te dé mi opinión, Willoughby, de que se hará cargo de Crossjay antes que dejarlo si teme que el muchacho pierda su oportunidad de ingresar en la marina.

—Los marines parecen estar en ascenso —dijo sir Willoughby, sorprendido por la alocución y defendiendo los intereses del hijo de uno de ellos—. Entonces ha de hacerse cargo de Crossjay. No puedo aceptar la mitad del muchacho. Soy —se rio— el pretendiente legítimo al someterlo a juicio ante el sabio rey. Además, el muchacho tiene una dosis de mi sangre en él; no la tiene de Vernon, ni una gota.

—¡Ah!

—Ya ves, amor mío.

—¡Oh, lo veo, sí!

—No tengo pretensiones de perfección —continuó sir Willoughby—. Puedo soportar una buena cantidad de provocación; sin embargo, me puedo ofender y no estoy dispuesto a perdonar cuando me han ofendido. Habla con Vernon, si surge naturalmente la ocasión. Por supuesto yo he de hablar con él. Habrás observado, Clara, a un hombre que pasó junto a mí en el camino cuando volvíamos al trote a casa, sin que se llevara la mano al sombrero. Ese hombre es uno de mis arrendatarios y cuida de una granja de seiscientos acres; se llama Hoppner: un hombre obligado a recordar que, independientemente de mi posición, está en deuda conmigo. Tiene cinco años de permiso para labrar la tierra. Debo decir que detesto la mala educación de nuestra población rural y la corrijo donde me cruzo con ella. Vernon es otra cuestión: solo hace falta que hable con él. Podríamos imaginar que el viejo camarada haya trabajado siempre bajo la magnética atracción de la miseria. Amor mío —se inclinó hacia ella y se detuvo en su andar arriba y abajo—, ¿estás cansada?

—Hoy estoy muy cansada —dijo Clara.

Le ofreció el brazo. Ella puso dos dedos sobre él y los quitó cuando Willoughby intentó presionarlos con su costado.

No insistió. Caminar a su lado era compartir la majestuosidad de su caminar.

Willoughby se puso en un extremo de la puerta para que ella entrara en casa y adoró su mejilla, su oreja y la oscura suavidad de su nuca, donde vagaban los rizos ligeramente iluminados e irrecuperables para el peine: rizos, semirrizos, raíces, sarmientos, anillos de boda, plumas de pimpollo, en mechones o sueltos, en ascenso o descenso, en forma de pequeñas patas de seda, ninguno de ellos más grueso que una línea de lápiz, más maliciosos que ondas de oro para atrapar el corazón.

Leticia no tenía nada que ofrecer que se pareciera a esa belleza.

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27 Richard Busby (1606-1695) fue director de la escuela de Westminster. Partidario de los castigos corporales (impartidos con una vara de abedul), sus pupilos, entre los que se contaban la mayoría de los obispos anglicanos de su época y personalidades como Christopher Wren, John Dryden o John Locke, lo recordaron siempre con afecto.

X

En el que sir Willoughby se aventura a darse el título a sí mismo

AHORA bien, Vernon le era útil a su primo; era el eficaz secretario de un hombre que gobernaba su hacienda con astucia y diligencia, pero que había sido una o dos veces desafortunado en los juicios que había emitido desde la tarima magisterial como juez de paz y, en esas ocasiones, una semicolumna de inglés incisivo apoyado por una cita clásica había impresionado a sir Willoughby por el valor de un secretario semejante en una controversia. No temía a ese fiero dragón de aliento abrasador —la prensa periódica— mientras Vernon fuera su mano derecha y, como pretendía entrar en el Parlamento, preveía que lo iba a necesitar en gran medida. Además, le gustaba que su primo datara sus escritos de controversia sobre asuntos clásicos en Patterne Hall. Hacía que su casa brillara en un campo ajeno; demostraba el servicio de la erudición al darle un sabor a aristocracia libresca que, aunque no es del todo digno de tener y, de hecho, resulta despreciable en sí mismo, supera el material y al titular, sin que podamos decir cómo. Sin embargo, ahí reside el sabor. La vida consiste en salsas delicadas, la nobleza, platos famosos; tomadas a solas, serían nauseabundas; los platos solos, plebeyos. Así es, o lo es de algún modo, cuando tienes a un poeta, aún mejor a un erudito, adscrito al servicio de la casa. Sir Willoughby merecía tenerlo, pues estaba por encima de sus amigos del condado en su aprehensión del sabor concedido al hombre; teniéndolo, los hacía conscientes de su deficiencia. Su cocinero, M. Dehors, pupilo del gran Godefroy, no era el único cocinero francés del condado, pero su primo y secretario, el erudito prometedor, el elegante ensayista, era una decoración sin paralelo, desde luego en su clase. Personalmente nos reímos de él; es mejor que tú no lo hagas salvo que accedas a mostrar que desconoces el mundo superior de la literatura refinada. Sir Willoughby podía suscitar un abyecto silencio en una sobremesa rural al aludir a Vernon «trabajando en casa sobre sus etruscos y dorios», deteniéndose un momento para que la alusión calase y riéndose sonoramente para sí mismo de su excéntrico primo, dejándolo luego de lado.

Además, sir Willoughby aborrecía la pérdida de un rostro familiar en su círculo doméstico. Pensaba mal de los sirvientes que aceptaban su despido sin pedirle quedarse son él. Un sirviente que advertía de su partida participaba de cierta enemistad. El proyecto de Vernon de dejar la casa solariega ofendió y alarmó al sensible caballero. «¡Tendré que darle la mano de Letty Dale al final!», pensó, aceptando con amarga generosidad las condiciones que la falta de generosidad del otro le imponía. Desde su compromiso con la señorita Middleton, su mente eléctricamente previsora veía en la señorita Dale, si se quedaba en la vecindad y seguía soltera, la institutriz de sus hijos, que a menudo le haría consultas. Pero esa perspectiva se había disipado. Los dos, por tanto, podían casarse y vivir en una granja en los límites de su parque y Vernon podría mantener su puesto y Leticia su devoción. Había que enfrentarse al riesgo de desprenderse de ella. Es sabido que el matrimonio surte el efecto en las mujeres más fieles de que una gran pasión se disipa en sus volátiles pechos cuando logran un marido. Vemos especialmente en las mujeres el triunfo de lo animal sobre lo espiritual. Sin embargo, ha de correrse el riesgo con un propósito a la vista.

No teniendo gusto para discutir con Vernon, a quien solía confundir separándose de él abruptamente una vez le había dado su opinión, dejó que las dos personas interesadas en el joven Crossjay imaginaran que estaba meditando el asunto del muchacho e imaginaran que era sensato dejar que lo meditara, pues podía ser preternaturalmente agudo al interpretar a cualquiera de sus criaturas cuando se cruzaban en la corriente de sus sentimientos. Mientras tanto, dio instrucciones a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel para que trajeran de visita a Leticia Dale a la casa solariega, donde pronto se celebrarían cenas de gala y haría falta una conversadora agradable; donde una mujer inteligente, dotada de un sentimiento espléndido, considerada hasta entonces un milagro de constancia femenina, podría incitar a una mujer más joven a cierta emulación. Definitivamente, resolver la concesión de Leticia a Vernon era más de lo que podía hacer; ya era bastante con mantener la posición.

En cuanto a Clara, su genio para leer el corazón que no estaba en perfecta armonía con el suyo mediante la serie de movimientos de respuesta al suyo le advirtió de algo en su carácter que podría haberle sugerido a la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson su indefendible, absurda «pícara de porcelana». No había idea alguna en esa frase, pero, si contemplaba a Clara como una belleza de porcelana delicadamente inimitable, la sospecha de una onda delicadamente inimitable sobre sus rasgos inspiraba un pensamiento de diablura inocente, de diablura silvestre; el parecido con la apreciada y amable sustancia podía admitir lo idóneo del dudoso epíteto. Detestaba la frase, pero lo perseguía.

En ocasiones, desde luego, Clara tenía el aspecto de una ninfa que hubiera contemplado demasiado tiempo al fauno e involuntariamente hubiera copiado su labio al acecho y la mirada que resbalaba largamente. Su juego con el joven Crossjay parecía un regreso de la dama al gato; se convertía en felina como si su verdadera vitalidad hubiera estado en suspenso hasta que vio al muchacho. Sir Willoughby no desaprobaba en modo alguno la viveza física que le prometía salud en su compañera, pero había empezado a advertir en sus conversaciones que ella no pensaba lo suficiente en convertirse en un nido para él. Le opuso puntas de acero cuando, de manera figurada, desnudó su pecho para que fuera considerado el más suave y hermoso. Ella razonó: en otras palabras, se armó de ignorancia. Razonó contra él públicamente y atrajo a Vernon para que la apoyara. La influencia ha de contarse como poder y su influencia sobre Vernon logró persuadirlo para que bailara una noche en casa de lady Culmer, después de haberse mostrado melancólico en ese arte, y no solo lo persuadió de que estuviera a su lado, sino que lo manejó en el baile como si fuera un muchacho que jugara a la trompa sin cuerda, para contento de Vernon y de sir Willoughby, pues sería el último en objetar una manifestación de poder en su prometida. Considerando su influencia sobre Vernon, renovó su discurso sobre el joven Crossjay y, como era adicto al sistema, le confió que podía ser adiestrada a mirar por él y obrar por él.

—¿No ha vuelto a hablarte el viejo Vernon del muchacho? —dijo.

—Sí, el señor Whitford me ha preguntado.

—¡No me pregunta a mí, querida!

—Creerá que soy de más ayuda de lo que soy.

—Ya ves, amor mío, si deja a Crossjay en mis manos se irá. Le ha dado la locura de *ofrecer* su pluma en Londres, como él lo llama, y me he acostumbrado a él. No me gusta pensar en él como un pirata, anotando absurdos al dictado para ganarse un penoso sustento. Lo quiero aquí y suponer que se marche me ofende; pierde a un amigo y no será la primera vez que un amigo me ha tratado mal; pero, si me ofende, está acabado.

—¿Está qué? —exclamó Clara con un gesto de estremecimiento.

—Para mí será como si no hubiera existido. Acabado.

—¿A pesar de tu afecto?

—Debido a él, podría decir. Nuestra naturaleza es misteriosa y la mía tanto como la de cualquiera. A mi pesar, se marcha. Este no es el lenguaje que uso con el mundo. No perjudico al hombre; no me considerarán poco cristiano. Pero...

Sir Willoughby se encogió mansamente de hombros y extendió los brazos.

—Pero ¡háblame, háblame como le hablas al mundo, Willoughby; dame un alivio!

—Clara mía, somos uno. Deberías conocerme para lo peor, digamos, si quieres, tanto como para lo mejor.

—¿Puedo hablar yo también?

—¿Qué puedes tener que confesar?

Clara se mantuvo en silencio: la ola de una insensata resolución colmó su pecho y se apaciguó antes de decir:

—Cobardía, incapacidad de hablar.

—¡Mujeres! —dijo él.

No esperamos tanto de las mujeres; virtudes heroicas tan poco como vicios. No han desarrollado el carácter.

Willoughby retomó la conversación y, por su tono, ella comprendió que ahora ella misma se encontraba en el templo interior de él:

—Te cuento estas cosas; reconozco que no me elevan. Ayudan a constituir mi carácter. Te digo de la manera más humilde que albergo mucho del orgullo del arcángel caído.

Clara bajó la cabeza para contener un suspiro.

—Ha de ser orgullo —dijo Willoughby, como en un ensueño inducido por la seriedad con la que Clara había acogido la revelación y gloriándose en las negras llamas demoníacas con las que se había coronado a sí mismo.

—¿No puedes corregirlo? —dijo ella.

Willoughby replicó, profundamente vejado por la decepción:

—Soy lo que soy. Podría demostrarte matemáticamente que lo corrigen equivalentes o sustituciones de mi carácter. Si es una falta, lo asumo.

—A mí me lo parece: es cruel castigar al señor Whitford por tratar de mejorar su fortuna.

—Refleja mi parte en su fortuna. Solo tiene que adaptarse a mí para que sus honorarios se doblen.

—Quiere independencia.

—¡Independencia de *mí!*

—¡Libertad!

—¡A mis expensas!

—Oh Willoughby.

—Ay pero así es el mundo y yo lo conozco, amor mío, y, por hermosa que sea tu credulidad, encontrarás más reconfortante confiar en mi conocimiento del egoísmo del mundo. Dulcísima mía, ¿lo harás? ¡Lo harás! Un asomo de diferencia entre nosotros es intolerable. ¿No adviertes cómo rompería nuestro mágico anillo? Una pequeña fisura ¡y tendremos el mundo con su sucio diluvio! Pero mi tema era el viejo Vernon. Sí, pago por Crossjay si Vernon consiente en quedarse. Renuncio a mis planes para el muchacho, aunque los considere mejores. Ahora hemos de inducir a Vernon a quedarse. Tiene sus ideas respecto a quedarse bajo una señora de la casa y, por tanto, no rebatiremos eso: es un hombre con argumentos, ¡una especie de lunática determinación se apodera del viejo Vernon! Dejemos que se establezca cerca de mí, en una de mis casas de campo; muy bien, para que se establezca hemos de casarlo.

—¿Quién es? —dijo Clara, con la imagen de la dama golpeándole la sien.

—Las mujeres —dijo Willoughby— nacen casamenteras y la más persuasiva es una joven prometida. Para un hombre —¡alguien como el viejo Vernon!— es irresistible. Es mi deseo y eso te obliga. Es tu deseo y eso lo subyuga a él. Si se va, se va para bien. Si se queda, es amigo mío. Lo trato con sencillez, como a cualquiera. Es el secreto de la autoridad. La señorita Dale perderá pronto a su padre. Vive de una pensión; tiene por delante la perspectiva de abandonar la vecindad de la casa, a menos que se establezca cerca de nosotros. Todo su corazón está en esta región, es la pasión de esa pobre alma. Cuenta con que aceptará. Apenas requerirá cortejo, ¡el cortejo del viejo Vernon! Imagínate la escena, amor mío. La noción que Vernon tiene del cortejo, sospecho, será tratar a la dama como un léxico y pasar las páginas para encontrar la palabra y recorrer las páginas para encontrar otra palabra hasta dar con una frase. No frunzas el ceño por el viejo Vernon, Clara mía; hay quienes tienen el lenguaje en sus lenguas y quienes no. Algunos son leños secos; varoniles, honestos, pero tan apartados, tan educadamente al margen del sexo, que les hace falta absolutamente que desde fuera les proporcionen los hilos de seda para atrapar a las mujeres. ¡Así es!

Sir Willoughby se rio delante de Clara para relajar la soñolienta petrificación de su mirada.

—Pero puedo asegurarte, querida, que lo he visto. Vernon no sabe hablar como *nosotros* hablamos. Tiene, o tenía, lo que se llama un vago afecto por la señorita Dale. Fue de lo más divertido: ¡su cortejo! ¡El aire de un perro con la conciencia intranquila tratando de reconciliarse con su amo! Nos daba a todos la risa. Por supuesto quedó en nada.

—¿Te ofenderá hasta la extinción el señor Whitford —dijo Clara— si declina?

Willoughby musitó un afectuoso «Sshh» por su bobada.

—Los juntaremos lo mejor que sepamos. Ya ves, Clara, que deseo hacer y haré algunos sacrificios para retenerlo.

—Pero ¿qué es lo que sacrificas? ¿Una casa de campo? —dijo Clara, combativa en todos los frentes.

—Un ideal, tal vez. No enfatizo el sacrificio. Me opongo firmemente a las separaciones. Por tanto, dirás, ¿preparo el terreno para las uniones? Ejerce tu influencia para bien, amor mío. Creo que podrías persuadirlo de que nos pusiera una danza escocesa en la mesa.

—¿No hay nada que decirle de Crossjay?

—Tenemos a Crossjay en reserva.

—Es urgente.

—Confía en mí. Tengo mis ideas. No estoy ocioso. Ese muchacho puja por un buen jinete. Las circunstancias podrían...

Sir Willoughby murmuró para sí y se dirigió a su prometida:

—¿Caballería? Si lo ponemos en la caballería, haremos de él un caballero que no nos avergüence o, en determinadas circunstancias, en la Guardia. Medítalo, amor mío. De Craye, que, doy por supuesto, será mi padrino, suponiendo que el viejo Vernon decline, es teniente coronel de la Guardia, un caballero meticuloso, estúpido, si quieres, pero elegante; irlandés, ya lo verás, y me gustaría poner a su lado a un teniente naval en la sala de estar para que los comparases y consideres el modelo que escogerías para un muchacho en el que estés interesada. Horacio es la gracia y la galantería encarnadas; fatuo, probablemente: he estado siempre con él en los términos más amistosos para examinarlo de cerca. Se convirtió en uno de mis perros, aunque es mayor que yo, y parece gustarle estar a mis pies. Uno de los pocos rostros de hombre que puedo llamar admirablemente encantadores, tal vez sin nada detrás. Como Vernon dice, una nada picoteada por los buitres y descolorida por el desierto. No es mal conversador, si te basta con mantener la pelota. Te divertirá. El viejo Horacio no sabe lo divertido que es.

—¿Dice el señor Whitford eso del coronel De Craye?

—He olvidado la persona de quien lo dijo. ¿Así que te has dado cuenta de la manía de Vernon? Cítale uno de sus epigramas y se pondrá en marcha enseguida. Es una receta infalible para ponerlo a tono. Si quie-

ro tenerlo de buen humor, solo tengo que advertir: Como tú dices. Lo pongo derecho al instante.

—Yo —dijo Clara— he advertido sobre todo su ansiedad por el muchacho, por lo que lo admiro.

—Encomiable, aunque no particularmente previsor ni sagaz. Bueno, querida, atácalo enseguida: llévalo al tema de nuestra hermosa vecina. La señorita Dale será nuestra invitada durante una semana y todo el asunto podría estar zanjado antes de que se vaya. Ahora está esperando la llegada de una prima para que ayude a su padre. Un pequeño y suave empujón pondrá a Vernon de rodillas hasta donde pueda doblarlas, pero cuando una dama está dispuesta a esperar una declaración, ya sabes, vaya, ¿no —¿o sí?— exige toda la fórmula? Aunque algunas hermosas fortalezas...

La abrazó. Clara estaba acostumbrándose a eso. Estaba condenada a ello y, al no ver ninguna salida, invocó una escarcha amistosa para contener su sangre y pasar el momento insensiblemente. Tras pasarlo, se reprochó a sí misma por haberlo magnificado, pensando que era más soportable que escucharlo. ¿Qué podía hacer? Estaba enjaulada; por su palabra de honor, como en un tiempo pensó; por su cobardía, en otro, y apenas consciente de que lo último era un cerrojo más fuerte que lo primero, meditó en la cuestión abstracta de si la cobardía de la mujer puede ser tan absoluta que la arroje a la boca de su aversión. ¿Es concebible? ¿No habrá un momento en el que mantenerla a raya? Pero entonces el Honor de rostro macilento empezaba a reclamar su atención, pues aunque tuviera de nuevo valor, debía tener valor para romper con el honor, atreverse a ser infiel y no decirse solo: «Seré valiente», sino lo suficientemente valiente como para perder el honor. La jaula de una mujer comprometida, hambrienta de romper su compromiso, tiene dos guardianes, uno noble y otro vil. ¿Dónde hay en toda la tierra una criatura tan horriblemente encerrada? Depende de ella superar lo que la degrada, que gane la libertad superando lo que exalta.

Al contemplar su situación, brotó esa idea (o el vapor de la juventud que tomaba el aspecto divino de una idea), nacida de su malestar actual, en la mente de Clara: que ha de ser un mundo mal construido si la hora de ignorancia se convierte en creador de nuestro destino al vernos forzados a las elecciones decisivas de las que dependen los principales motivos de la vida. Su maestro la había llevado a contemplar su propia imagen del mundo.

Pensó: «¡Cuánto debe despreciar un hombre a las mujeres para exponerse como lo hace él conmigo!»

La señorita Middleton le debía a sir Willoughby Patterne haber dejado de pensar como una niña. ¿Cuándo había empezado el gran cambio? Mirando atrás, podía imaginar que fue durante el periodo que llamamos, en el amor, el principio, casi al principio. Tuvo que imaginarlo a través de los barrotes con los que había imaginado sus emociones de aquella época. Estaban tan muertas que ni siquiera se alzaban bajo las formas de sombras en la fantasía. Sin culparlo, pues ella era igual de responsable, se consideró una persona atrapada. En sueños, de algún modo, se había comprometido una prisión perpetua y, ¡oh terror!, no en una mazmorra silenciosa; los muros enrejados que la rodeaban hablaban, suscitaban el ardor, expectantes de admiración.

Era incapaz de decir por qué no podía rechazar la situación, por qué retrocedía cada vez más en su interior, por qué invocaba la escarcha para matar sus sentimientos más tiernos. Estaba revuelta, hasta que el susurro del día de las campanas la redujera a una desolada sumisión, de la que un aliento de paz la llevaba de nuevo a revolverse en rápidas y graduales etapas, y una vez más el aspecto de aquel día concreto de alegre negrura la derrumbaba sobre la tierra. Estaba vivo, avanzaba, tenía boca, tenía una canción. Clara recibía cartas de doncellas que escribían sobre ello y las sentía como olas que empujan los restos de un naufragio a la orilla. Trazando con una sensación de aflicción el círculo completo que la envolvía, consideró la posibilidad de encontrarse al borde de la locura. De otro modo, ¿no podía ser acusada igual de deplorablemente de caprichosa? Había escrito a algunas de esas jóvenes no hacía tanto a propósito de este caballero. ¿Cómo? ¿En qué tono? ¿En qué consistía entonces su locura y ahora su recuperación? Le parecía que haber escrito sobre él con entusiasmo estaba más cerca de la locura que deshacer su unión, pero, a solas, oponiéndose a todo lo que había consentido en poner en marcha, es demasiado extraño para una muchacha que la perfecta justificación se encuentre en la razón cuando la busca.

Sir Willoughby estaba destinado a darle aquella clave de intuición especial que revelaba y estampaba sobre él un título que fortificaba su espíritu de revuelta y casi lo consagraba.

El popular médico del condado y famoso ingenio para las anécdotas, el doctor Corney, había sido invitado esa noche y al día siguiente se habló de él y de los recursos de su arte que Armand Dehors había provisto al oír que tendría que administrarlos al gusto de una reunión de *hommes d'esprit* . Sir Willoughby miró a Dehors con su acostumbrada ironía benevolente, grande a su manera, al hablar de las personas que le servían. «Puesto que no puede darnos diariamente una cena tan buena, supongo que tendremos que acudir a la naturaleza francesa para aprender. Los franceses tienen el hábito de ocultar sus defectos con entusiasmo. No sienten reverencia. Si le hubiera dicho que quería algo particularmente excelente, habría tenido una cena vulgar. Pero les entusiasma lo escogido y eso es lo que debemos proponer. Conoce a un francés y conocerás Francia. He tenido a Dehors bajo mis ojos dos años y puedo hacer que aumente su entusiasmo con una pala-

bra. Creyó que *hommes d'esprit* denotaba hombres de letras. Los franceses han destruido su nobleza en aras de la excitación. Han subido a un pedestal a los literatos, no para adorarlos, porque no pueden hacer eso, sino para ponerse a sí mismos en un estado de efervescencia. No tienen sobre sí una grandeza real, por eso disimulan. ¡Tal vez hayan de llamarlo igualdad! ¡Ay por mucho que agites la cabeza, mi buen Vernon! Ya ves que la naturaleza humana regresa, aunque tratemos de expulsarla, y los franceses solo difieren de nosotros en hundirse en sangre para descubrir que recurren una vez más al viejo truco: soy su igual, sir, nacido igual. ¡Oh! ¿Es usted un hombre de letras? Permítame la pompa al respecto. Sí, Vernon, y creo que el tipo te considera la cabeza del establecimiento. No soy celoso. ¡Suponiendo que atienda sus funciones! Hay un filósofo francés que propone llamar los días por los cumpleaños de los hombres de letras franceses, el día de Voltaire, el día de Rousseau, el día de Racine y demás [28] . Tal vez Vernon pueda decirnos de quién es el primero de abril».

—Unos cuantos errores carecen de consecuencias cuando estás en la vena satírica —dijo Vernon—. Satisfecho de conocer una nación en la persona de un cocinero.

—Tal vez nos lean a nosotros en un jinete —dijo el doctor Middleton—. Creo que intercambiamos jinetes por cocineros y que nuestros vecinos no se llevan la mejor parte.

—No, pero, mi querido Vernon, es absurdo —dijo sir Willoughby—. ¿Por qué pasarse el día gritando el nombre de los hombres de letras?

—Filósofos.

—Bien, filósofos.

—De todos los países y épocas. Son los benefactores de la humanidad.

—¡Bene...!

La risa burlona de sir Willoughby truncó la palabra.

—Hay pretensiones en todo eso incompatibles con el sentido común inglés. ¿No te das cuenta?

—Podríamos —dijo Vernon—, si quieres, dar títulos alternativos a los días o tener días alternos, dedicados a nuestras grandes familias que hayan hecho algo meritorio ese día.

Se oyó decir a la rebelde Clara, deleitándose en la conversación:

—¿Habría suficientes?

—Un poeta o dos podrían ayudar.

—Tal vez un estadista —sugirió ella.

—Un púgil, si hace falta.

—Para días de viento —observó el doctor Middleton y, rápidamente, como penitencia, retomó la conversación que había postergado intencionadamente con una observación general sobre nociones de última moda y una palabra aparte a Vernon, lo que suscitó la bendita sospecha de Clara de que su padre no estaba dispuesto a secundar las opiniones de sir Willoughby aunque las compartiera.

Sir Willoughby había dirigido la conversación. Disgustado por que le hubieran retirado el hilo, se volvió a Clara y le contó una de las anécdotas de sobremesa del doctor Corney y otra, con una vasta cantidad de naturaleza humana en ella, sobre un valetudinario caballero, cuya mujer estaba desesperadamente enferma, que acudió a los médicos reunidos en consulta fuera de la habitación de la enferma para implorarles por todo lo que más quisieran, llorando, que salvaran a la pobre esposa para él, diciendo: «Ella lo es todo para mí, todo, y si se muere me veré obligado a correr el riesgo de casarme de nuevo; debo casarme de nuevo, pues me ha acostumbrado tanto a las pequeñas atenciones de una esposa que de verdad no puedo perderla. ¡Ha de salvarse!». El amante esposo de cualquier esposa devota se frotó las manos.

—Ahí tienes, Clara, al Egoísta —añadió sir Willoughby—. El perfecto Egoísta. Ya ves a lo que se reduce, ¡y su mujer! El tipo era completamente inconsciente de estar dándole rienda suelta al egoísmo más grosero.

—¡Un Egoísta! —dijo Clara.

—¡Cuidado con casarte con un Egoísta, querida mía!

Se inclinó galantemente y a ella le pareció tan fatuamente ciego que apenas pudo creerlo culpable de haber pronunciado las palabras que le había oído, con la mirada perdida sobre él hasta que se detuvo de golpe en los pensamientos que sostenían sus ojos. Se volvió a Vernon, se volvió a su padre y a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. Nadie había visto al hombre en la palabra, nadie se había dado cuenta de la palabra; sin embargo, esa palabra fue su hierba mágica, su lámpara encendida, la clave sobre él (y, ay, lo pensó al sentir que lo necesitaba), el alegato en su defensa. ¡Egoísta! Lo contempló —¡desafortunado, designado por sí mismo como era!— a la luz implacable de la lámpara en sus buenas y sus malas cualidades y las buenas se empaparon de la primera persona del singular. Su generosidad clamaba por el *yo* más alto que el resto. Concibámoslo a la edad del héroe del doctor Corney: «Les ruego que salven a mi mujer para mí. Desde luego tendré que lograr otra, si la pierdo, que no me ame menos y entienda las peculiaridades de mi carácter y aprecie mis actitudes». Willoughby estaba en su trigésimo segundo año, joven, por tanto, fuerte y sano, aunque su obsesiva vuelta a su tema principal, su énfasis en yo y mí, le prestaba el aspecto de un anciano mancha-

do de una juventud decadente.

«Cuidado con casarte con un Egoísta».

¿La ayudaría él a escapar? La idea de la escena que seguiría a su petición de liberación y ser arrastrada fuera de los muros de su egoísmo, golpeándose la cabeza contra las esquinas, la alarmó con una sensación de malestar.

Estaba el ejemplo de Constanza. Pero a aquella desesperada joven la había ayudado un caballero galante y enamorado; se había encontrado con un capitán Oxford.

Clara pensó en la pareja hasta que le pareció heroica. Se preguntó a sí misma si podría, si aparecería alguien. Cerró los ojos lánguidamente, apoyándose en el lado equivocado de sus deseos, aunque incapaz de decirse no.

¡Sir Willoughby había dicho desde luego cuidado! Casarse con él sería un acto perpetrado a pesar de su expresa advertencia. Fue tan lejos como para pensar en él diciéndole: Te lo había advertido. Concibió el estado de casada con él como el de una mujer atada no a un hombre de corazón, sino a un obelisco lleno de jeroglíficos, oyéndolo eternamente explicarlos, renovando incansablemente sus lecciones.

Era completamente seguro que ese hombre de piedra no la liberaría. Esa petrificación del egoísmo rechazaría con sorpresa y austeridad la petición. Su orgullo le impediría entender su deseo de liberarse y, si ella se decidiera, sin hacerlo directamente a la manera de Constanza, habría que pensar en la miserable perplejidad de su padre, para quien una complicación como esa sería un trágico dilema. Su padre, a pesar de la ternura por su hija, lo consideraría un asunto de honor; aunque cedería ante ella, se disgustaría, en una tempestad de preocupación, y el doctor Middleton levantaría los brazos, dejaría a un lado los libros, dejaría de hablar y parecería un náufrago en el océano, sin nada que lo protegiera de la calamidad. En cuanto al mundo, ladraría a sus pies. Podía llamar Egoísta al hombre del que se había soltado; el mundo hablaría de dejarlo plantado. Se detuvo amargamente en su acuerdo con sir Willoughby respecto al mundo, poniendo sobre sus hombros que su jardín se hubiera llenado de ortigas y su horizonte fuera el oscuro cuarto lado de un cuadrado.

Clara fue de persona en persona visitando la casa. La admiración por la invitada fue universal y, como se le hizo ver, honesta. Ni una sola alma sospechó su naturaleza encubierta. La agonía de su hipocresía al aceptar sus cumplidos como prometida de sir Willoughby Patterne apenas se vio moderada por el desprecio hacia su infatuación. Trató de engañarse a sí misma con el pensamiento de que estaban en lo cierto y de que era ella la loca y perversa inconstante. En su ansiedad por estrangular la rebeldía que su mente había comunicado a su sangre, y la acompañaba estuviera presente su mente o no, alentó a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel a magnificar al ficticio sujeto de su idolatría con la esperanza de poder introducirse imaginativamente y, en cierto modo, someterse a la necesidad de su posición. Si, en parte, tuvo éxito en dejar estupefacto su propio antagonismo, cinco minutos con él deshicieron lo hecho.

Willoughby le pidió que llevara la perlas de Patterne en una cena con grandes señoras, diciéndole que le pediría a la señorita Isabel que se las llevara. Clara solicitó declinar con el pretexto de no tener derecho a llevarlas. Él se rio por su modestia.

—Podría parecer afectación —dijo—. Te doy el derecho. Virtualmente eres mi esposa.

—No.

—¿Ante el cielo?

—No. No estamos casados.

—Como mi prometida, ¿las llevarás para complacerme?

—Preferiría no hacerlo. No puedo llevar joyas prestadas. No puedo llevarlas. Perdóname, no puedo. Willoughby —dijo, despreciándose a sí misma por falta de fortaleza al no mantener el cortante rechazo provocador—, ¿no parecería una víctima ataviada para el sacrificio, la ternera engalanada que vemos en las urnas griegas, con toda esa joyería?

—¡Mi querida Clara! —exclamó el atónito enamorado—. ¿Cómo puedes llamarlas prestadas cuando son las joyas de Patterne, nuestras perlas, recuerdo de familia, incomparables, me atrevería a afirmar, desde luego en mi condado y en muchos otros, y que pasan a ser usadas por la dama de la casa en el curso natural de las cosas?

—Son tuyas, no son mías.

—Son tuyas en perspectiva.

—Llevarlas sería anticiparnos al hecho.

—¿Con mi consentimiento, mi aprobación? ¿Pidiéndotelo yo?

—No soy aún... Nunca seré...

—¿Mi esposa? —Willoughby se rio triunfal y la silenció con muestras de cariño.

—Tal vez su escrúpulo ha sido honorable —dijo. Tal vez las joyas estuvieran más seguras en su estuche de hierro. Solo había tratado de sorprenderla y gratificarla.

Clara se estaba armando de valor para hablar con más sencillez cuando Willoughby dejó de insistir en que llevara las joyas aparentando una deferencia a sus deseos, lo que la desarmó al apelar a su simpatía.

Sin embargo, dijo:

—Temo que no estemos siempre de acuerdo, Willoughby.

—¡Cuando seas algo mayor! —fue la irritante respuesta.

—Entonces será demasiado tarde para hacer el descubrimiento.

—El descubrimiento, entiendo, no es imperativo, amor mío.

—Me parece que somos opuestos.

—Ten por seguro que seré consciente de ello a la menor indicación.

—Pero sé —continuó Clara—, me he dado cuenta de ello, que el ideal de conducta para las mujeres es someterlas a ser parte de un acompañamiento.

—¿Para las mujeres, amor mío? Mi esposa estará en armonía natural conmigo.

—¡Ah! —Clara apretó los labios. Bostezaría.

—Estoy más dormida aquí que en ninguna otra parte.

—El nuestro, Clara mía, es el aire más puro del reino. Tiene el efecto de la brisa marina.

—Pero ¡si siempre estoy adormilada aquí!

—Tendremos que hacer una exhibición pública de la Belleza.

Ese estallido de su vivacidad la derrotó.

Clara lo dejó, sintiendo el desprecio del cerebro febrilmente agitado y mordaz por el cerebro que rumia en los felices pastos del sonambulismo. Tan violenta fue la fiebre, tan aguda su introspección, que perdonó a pocos y Vernon no se contaba entre ellos. El joven Crossjay, a quien Clara consideraba el menos capaz de todos para ser su aliado, fue el único al que buscó con el deseo real de complacerlo; era el único al que había envidiado afectuosamente, el más joven, más libre, el que tenía el mundo por delante sin saber lo horrible que era el mundo y que podía contemplarlo. Amaba al muchacho porque no esperaba nada de él. Otros, Vernon Whitford, por ejemplo, podrían haber ayudado y no habían movido un dedo. Vernon leyó su caso. Un escrutinio tan penetrante, bajo la apariencia de una meditación abstracta, aunque sus ojos se fijaran en ella uno o dos segundos, significaba que la leyó línea a línea y hasta el final, salvo lo que ella pensara de él por ponerla a prueba con aquel cortante acero de la intuición sin un propósito.

Clara era consciente de su injusticia. Era su caso, su lamentable caso: los impacientes nervios al borde del pánico de una criatura salvaje capturada, que pide ayuda. Exageraba sus sufrimientos para recabar fuerzas y expulsarlos y las perdía al darse cuenta de que eran exagerados, y del conflicto surgía la precipitación, con un grito tan salvaje como cualquiera salido de la locura, pues no se ruborizaba al decirse: «¡Si alguien me amara!» Antes de oír hablar de Constanza había meditado sobre la libertad como una diosa virgen; los hombres estaban fuera de sus pensamientos; incluso la figura de un rescatador, si alguno se asomaba a su imaginación, era más la de un ángel que la de un héroe. La hermosa feminidad infantil había desaparecido. Con su cuerpo al alcance del dragón, con el sabor de la aversión, incapaz de discutir, incapaz de hablar en voz alta, empezó a hablarse a sí misma y toda la salud de su naturaleza la hizo exclamar como una mujer: «¡Si fuera amada!», no por el amor, sino por la libre respiración, y decirlo fue asegurarle vida y duración al deseo, como el anhelo de una madre en un naufragio es que su hijo llegue a la costa. «¡Si un noble caballero pudiera verme como soy y no rehusara ayudarme! ¡Oh! Estar encerrada en esta prisión de espinas y zarzas. No puedo abrirme camino. Soy una cobarde. Mi petición de ayuda lo delata. Creo que si alguien me señalara con el dedo me cambiaría. Acudiría sangrando y a carcajadas hacia un camarada. ¡Oh! Un camarada. No quiero un amante. Encontraría a otro Egoísta, no tan malo, pero lo suficiente como para que su aliento fuera mortal. Podría seguir a un soldado, como la pobre Sally o Molly. Arriesga su vida por su país y una mujer puede estar orgullosa del peor de los hombres que lo hiciera. Constanza encontró a un soldado. Tal vez rezara y su plegaria fuera atendida. Enfermó. Pero ¡oh cuánto la amo por ello! Su nombre era Harry Oxford. Papá lo llamaría su Perseo. Ella tuvo que sentir que no había explicación para su sufrimiento. Solo tenía que actuar, que zambullirse. Primero se fijó en Harry Oxford. Ser capaz de decir su nombre y ver que la esperaba debieron ser un alivio, una mejoría. No titubeó, cortó los lazos, se entregó. ¡Valiente muchacha! ¿Qué piensas de mí? Pero yo no tengo a Harry Whitford, estoy sola. Que se diga lo que quiera contra las mujeres; hemos de ser muy malas para que se escriban esas cosas de nosotras: pero decid que pedirles que suscriban un juramento, en una ceremonia, a causa de una promesa ignorante, con un hombre al que han confundido es... es...». La repentina conciencia de que le había dado otro apellido a Oxford la sacudió y se sonrojó.

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28 Meredith se refiere a Auguste Comte, a quien admiraba.

XI

La doble floración del cerezo silvestre

SIR Willoughby escogió un momento en el que Clara estaba con él y tenía una buena retirada a través de los batientes de las ventanas hasta el césped, en caso de contundencia por parte del enemigo, para atacar a su primo por el absurdo plan de desestabilizar la familia con una correría por Londres.

—Por cierto, Vernon, ¿qué es eso que has estado murmurando con cualquiera, salvo conmigo, de dejarnos para lanzarte al puchero y convertirte en sopa? Londres no es mejor y tú vales para algo más. Te pido que no sigas enojándome. Date una vuelta por el extranjero si estás inquieto. Tómate dos o tres meses y únete a nosotros de vuelta a casa; luego piensa en establecerte, te lo ruego. Sigue mi ejemplo, si quieres. Podrías disponer de una de mis casas de campo o de un lugar construido para ti. Cualquier cosa que evite que un hombre destruya el sentido de la estabilidad. En Londres, mi viejo amigo, perderás tu identidad. ¿Qué eres allí? Te lo pregunto, ¿qué? Tengo la sensación de que la casa cruje cuando un hombre está perpetuamente deslizándose y no puede detenerse. Aquí eres conocido, puedes estudiar a gusto; en Londres no eres nadie. Te lo digo honestamente, lo siento por mí; una semana en Londres me empuja literalmente a casa para descubrir al individuo donde lo dejé. Estás avisado. ¿No te propondrás marcharte?

—Tengo la intención —dijo Vernon.

—¿Por qué?

—Ya te lo mencioné.

—¿En persona?

—Por encima de tu hombro; por lo general es la única ocasión que me das.

—Que yo sepa no me lo has mencionado. En cuanto a la razón, podría oírte dar una docena de tus razones y no entendería ninguna. Va en contra de tus intereses y de mis deseos. Vamos, amigo mío, no soy el único al que disgustas. Tú mismo, Vernon, has dicho que los ingleses serían perfectos judíos si pudieran arreglárselas para vivir en un sistema patriarcal. ¡Lo has dicho, sí, lo has dicho! Lo recuerdo perfectamente. ¡Oh! En cuanto a tus dobles sentidos, lo dijiste, burlándote de la incapacidad de las familias inglesas para vivir juntas por su mal carácter, ¡y ahora eres el primero en romper nuestra unión! Yo no trato en modo alguno de ser un perfecto judío, pero...

Sir Willoughby captó señales de un probable intercambio de sonrisas entre su prometida y su primo. Levantó el rostro, pareció consultar sus párpados y decidió reírse:

—Está bien, lo confieso, me gusta la idea de vivir patriarcalmente.

Se volvió a Clara.

—¡El reverendo doctor uno de los nuestros!

—¿Mi padre? —dijo ella.

—¿Por qué no?

—Los hábitos de papá son los de un estudioso.

—Para que no te separes de él, querida.

Clara le agradeció a sir Willoughby la amabilidad de pensar en su padre analizando mentalmente la amabilidad, en la que, al menos, encontraba una falta de amabilidad, no del todo egoísmo, aunque sabía que estaba allí.

—Podríamos proponérselo —dijo él.

—¿Cómo un cumplido?

—Si condesciende a aceptarlo como un cumplido. ¡Estos grandes estudiosos! Y si Vernon se marcha, nuestra invitación al doctor Middleton para que se quede... Pero es demasiado absurdo para discutirlo. Oh Vernon, sobre el señorito Crossjay, lo veré.

Estaba a punto de ofrecerle a Vernon su brazo y salir al jardín cuando Clara dijo:

—¿Harás que Crossjay se prepare para la marina, Willoughby? No hay un solo día que perder.

—Sí, sí; lo veré. Depende de mí tener al bribonzuelo a la vista.

Le ofreció su mano para acompañarla hasta la grava, sorprendido al ver lo ruborizada que estaba.

Clara respondió a su invitación poniendo su mano sobre el brazo con dedos vacilantes.

—No puede posponerse, Willoughby.

Su actitud sugería una estipulación antes de haberlo rozado.

—Es un asunto de dinero, como sabes, Willoughby —dijo Vernon—. Si estoy en Londres no podré pro-

porcionarle ingresos al muchacho por un tiempo o no estoy seguro de poder hacerlo.

—¿Por qué demonios has de irte?

—Esa es otra cuestión. Quiero que ocupes mi lugar con él.

—En ese caso las circunstancias cambian. Soy responsable de él y tengo derecho a dirigirlo de acuerdo con mi prescripción.

—Es probable que tengamos un ocioso patán más.

—Garantizo hacer de él un caballero.

—Ya tenemos bastante de tus caballeros.

—No podrías tener bastante, mi buen Vernon.

—Son la apología nacional de la indolencia. Adiestrar a un muchacho sin recursos para ser uno de ellos es casi tan malo como educarlo en una guarida de ladrones; estará en guerra con la sociedad, si no jugando con la policía.

—Vernon, ¿has visto al padre de Crossjay, ahora capitán de marines? Creo que sí.

—Es un buen hombre y un oficial muy galante.

—Y, a pesar de su cualidades, es un oso, un oso viejo. Ahora es capitán, pero ha alcanzado el rango muy tarde, concédelo. Ahí tienes lo que llamas un buen hombre, indudablemente un galante oficial, neutralizado por el hecho de no ser un caballero. Mantener el trato con él está fuera de la cuestión. No es de extrañar que el gobierno no lo ascienda con rapidez. El joven Crossjay no lleva tu nombre. Lleva el mío y al respecto debo tener voz en el establecimiento de su carrera. Digo enfáticamente que la aprobación de una sala de estar para un joven es el mejor certificado para sus oportunidades generales en la vida. Conozco a un comerciante de la City de Londres y conozco un despacho de abogados que no tienen a nadie que no sea universitario en su oficina; al menos tienen la preferencia.

—Crossjay es un cabeza hueca que no casa con la universidad ni con las salas de estar —dijo Vernon—. Dispuesto a luchar y morir por ti, eso es todo.

Sir Willoughby se limitó a responder:

—El muchacho es mi favorito.

Su ansiedad por escapar a una réplica le obligó a salir al jardín, dejando a Clara detrás. «¡Amor mío!», dijo, disculpándose al volverse hacia ella. Ella podía no estar seria, pero en su aspecto no había ningún hoyuelo que lo suavizara y sus ojos brillaban. Había apostado de corazón que el diálogo que había provocado sobre Crossjay expondría al Egoísta. Había otros motivos, tejidos y solapados, irreconocibles, suficientes para afectarla con algo peor que el rubor de su reconocimiento de la maldad cuando se detuvo a hablar de Crossjay delante de Vernon.

¡Al menos se había visto que era consciente del sufrimiento en su asociación con el Egoísta! Vernon representaba al mundo y confiaba en ella. El mundo, entonces, no pensaría tan mal de Clara, pensó con esperanza, al mismo tiempo que pensaba de la peor manera de sí misma. Pero las autoacusaciones quedaban para el día del juicio; tenía y debía tener el mundo con ella, o la creencia de que lo tendría, en la terrible lucha que preveía en su horizonte, ahora su límite más preciso. Lo necesitaba para el inevitable conflicto. No podía sacrificar su honestidad. Considerando lo débil que era, cuán solitaria, lo terriblemente enredada que estaba, diariamente desgraciada más allá del poder de cualquier velo para ocultar sus feroces sensaciones, un poco de hipocresía era el arma natural de una pobre muchacha. Molió su conciencia con la seguridad de que se trataba de magníficas trivialidades, sin ser del todo inconsciente de que ella era una trivialidad magnífica, sin ser del todo inconsciente de que se estaba preparando para una conveniente ceguera en presencia de alternativas terribles, pero el orgullo de enfatizar pecados tan pequeños le dio a su pureza un sonrojo de placer y sofocó la advertencia interior. En realidad no se atrevía a pensar mal de sí misma durante mucho tiempo y se lanzó a la batalla como era. Monjas y anacoretas podrían; tienen tiempo. Lamentó las pérdidas que tendría que asumir por ayudarse a sí misma y, aunque ganara, al mundo; con pesar advirtió el peligro de la pérdida y lo dejó pasar.

—Ya ves que el viejo Vernon carece de argumentos —le dijo Willoughby.

Aseguró su mano en su brazo para que sintiera que se apoyaba en un pilar de fortaleza.

—Cada vez que el pequeño cerebro esté en duda, perplejo, indeciso en el rumbo, ella vendrá a mí, ¿verdad? Estaré siempre a la escucha —prosiguió dulcemente—. ¡Mía! Y yo tuyo cuando el mundo me fastidie. Así nos completamos. Me conocerás, me conocerás a su tiempo. No soy un misterio para aquellos a los que me doy a conocer. No pretendo el misterio; sin embargo, confieso que el Willoughby de tu hogar —de tu corazón— no es del todo idéntico al Willoughby del mundo. Hemos de estar armados contra la ruda bestia.

La venganza de los jóvenes contra la monotonía es segura; no hay nada más seguro. No la planean, pero la semejanza es un veneno para sus sistemas y la venganza es su aliento más cordial, su estirar los miembros, correr por los campos. La naturaleza los venga.

—¿Cuándo llega el coronel De Craye? —dijo Clara.

—¿Horacio? En uno o dos días. ¿Quieres que esté aquí para conocer su parte, amor mío?

Clara no se había anticipado al pensamiento de la llegada del coronel De Craye; no sabía por qué lo había mencionado, pero ahora retrocedió, sorprendida, primero a un sombrío subterfugio y luego al banquillo de los acusados.

—No quiero que esté aquí. No sé si tiene una parte que enseñar. No albergo deseos. Willoughby, ¿no has dicho que yo acudiría a ti y que escucharías? ¿Lo harás? Soy tan vulgar que no me entenderás salvo que tomes mis palabras literalmente. Soy indigna. Soy veleidosa. Amo mi libertad. Quiero ser libre...

—¡Flitch! —llamó Willoughby.

Sonó necromántico.

—Perdóname, amor mío —dijo—. Ese hombre que ves allá viola mi indicación expresa de que no pise mis tierras y aquí lo encuentro en los límites de mi jardín.

Sir Willoughby agitó su mano en dirección a la abyecta figura de un hombre que lo interceptaba.

—Veleidosa, indigna, libertad... ¡Querida mía! —se inclinó ante ella cuando el hombre lo tranquilizó al marcharse—. Tienes libertad dentro de la ley, como todas las buenas mujeres; yo controlaré y dirigiré tus veleidades y tu sentido de la dignidad se rehará cuando seamos más íntimos; no es más que timidez. La sensación de falta de dignidad es una garantía de dignidad. ¡Creo que estoy en vena de sermonear! ¿De quién es la culpa? La vista de ese hombre ha sido fastidiosa. Flitch era mozo de cuadra, palafrenero y cochero de la casa, como su padre antes que él, desde hacía treinta años; su padre murió a nuestro servicio. El señor Flitch no tiene de qué quejarse, pero un día el demonio lo confundió con la idea de mejorar, quería ser independiente y se me presentó con la historia de abrir una tienda en la capital de nuestro condado. ¡Flitch! Recuerda, si te vas que sea para bien. Oh lo comprendió perfectamente. Muy bien, adiós, Flitch. El tipo era respetuoso; se parecía al chalado que pronto fue. Desde entonces, durante varios años, lo he tenido, contra mis indicaciones expresas, diez veces en mis tierras. Es curioso calcular. Por supuesto la tienda cerró y la independencia de Flitch consiste en dar vueltas con las manos en los bolsillos vacíos y contemplar la casa desde alguna elevación cercana.

—¿Está casado? ¿Tiene hijos? —dijo Clara.

—Nueve y una mujer que no sabe cocinar ni coser ni lavar.

—¿No podrías darle un empleo?

—¿Después de haberse despedido él mismo?

—Eso podría pasarse por alto.

—Aquí era feliz. Decidió irse a otra parte para ser libre, por supuesto, de mi yugo. Dejó mi servicio a pesar de mis advertencias. Flitch, digamos, emigró con su mujer y sus nueve hijos y el barco naufragó. Vuelve, pero su lugar está ocupado; es un fantasma aquí y me opongo a los fantasmas.

—Podría encontrarse un trabajo para él.

—Sería lo mismo que con el viejo Vernon, querida. Si se va, que sea para bien. Insistir en eso es el principio vital de mi autoridad. Por la misma razón podría una hoja caída pedir la vuelta al árbol. Una vez fuera, ¡fuera para toda la eternidad! Lo siento, pero fue una decisión tuya, amigo mío. Ya ves, Clara, que hay elementos en mí que...

—¡Es horrible!

—Ejerce tus poderes de persuasión con Vernon. Puedes hacer casi lo que quieras con él. Esta tarde vendrá la señorita Dale para quedarse una o dos semanas. Llévalo a tener una idea de ella. Elementos en mí, señalaba, que han de ser manejados tan cuidadosamente como la pólvora. Al mismo tiempo, no hay razón por la que no hayan de ser respetados, tenidos en cuenta en consideración a mí y atendiendo a las consecuencias. Los que no lo hagan así se arrepentirán.

—No les dices a los demás los elementos que hay en ti —dijo Clara.

—Desde luego que no: solo tengo una novia —fue su encantadora respuesta.

—¿Es justo conmigo que me muestres lo peor que hay en ti?

—¿Todo lo que soy?

Su halagadora inflexión y su sonrisa familiar hicieron que «Todo lo que soy» fuera tan afectuosamente significativo en su feliz confianza en los excesos del amor de Clara que acabó por comprender que se esperaba de ella que lo adorase y respaldase fuera lo que fuera él, sin estimación alguna de las cualidades, como hace el amor o el amor joven, como ella hizo acaso una vez, antes de que Willoughby le diera escalofríos. Eso fue antes de que su «pequeño cerebro» se activara y perturbara sus sentidos.

Sir Willoughby suponía que el grueso flotante de su personalidad se sostenía en el río plano del amor y, en consecuencia, creyendo que nadaba a sus anchas, era de eso de lo que hablaba.

Clara se alejó de esa idea con su exclamación mental: «¿Por qué no se pinta con colores más brillantes para mí?», y la pregunta: «¿No tiene un ideal de generosidad y caballerosidad?»

Pero el desafortunado caballero se imaginaba amado en el seno mismo del amor. Fantaseaba con que to-

do lo que tuviera que ver con él excitaba la curiosidad de las jóvenes, la reverencia femenina, el ardor por conocer más de él, lo que estaba siempre dispuesto a satisfacer repitiendo las mismas cosas. Su noción de las mujeres era el primitivo blanco y negro: hay buenas mujeres y malas mujeres y él poseía a una buena. Su elevada opinión de sí mismo reforzaba la creencia de que la providencia, como una cuestión de justicia y adecuación, debía seleccionar necesariamente una buena mujer para él o ¿qué pensaríamos de la providencia? Y esa mujer, configurada por esa mano moldeadora, estaría naturalmente en armonía con él desde el centro de su profunda identidad hasta el círculo radiante de sus variaciones. Conociendo el centro conoceríamos el círculo y descubriríamos que las variaciones son simplemente características y que hemos de viajar con los radios desde el círculo para llegar al centro. En consecuencia, sir Willoughby ponía a la señorita Middleton en uno u otro de esos rayos convergentes de vez en cuando. También a nosotros nos atrae a las profundidades, pero cuando hemos arponeado a una ballena y estamos sujetos a la soga hemos de ir hacia abajo; el milagro es volver a subir.

Las mujeres de esencias mixtas que relegan lo divino a lo considerablemente inferior estaban fuera de su visión de la mujer. Willoughby no podía admitir un ángel de cerámica como tampoco podía admitir una pícara de porcelana. Para él, las mujeres eran lo que eran cuando fueron moldeadas al principio; muchas de ellas agrietadas, muchas de ellas manchadas, aquí y allá un espécimen perfecto diseñado para la elección de los hombres. A un silbido del mundo les cerraba de golpe la puerta del mojigato; él mismo las habría marcado a fuego. En privado lo había hecho y estaba constituido por su extrema sensibilidad y gusto por un refinamiento ultrafemenino para ser un crítico severo de las mujeres durante el carnaval del egoísmo: la temporada del amor. Constanza... ¿podemos decirlo? Había sido, digámoslo, una hermosa, franca y joven comerciante con él en esa temporada; su naturaleza era la de la madre de héroes; recibe el homenaje, casi a medio camino, a diferencia, ingenuamente, de las madres por venir del regimiento de marionetas, que se retiran en medio de vapores, abatidas, convencionalmente; damas que adulan al caballero egoísta y lo proclaman «el primero». La ofensa de Constanza no había sido mayor, pero tampoco la actuación dramática de pureza que él deseaba de una novia y, por ello, la ofensa fue grande.

La temporada del amor es el carnaval del egoísmo y aporta la piedra de toque de nuestras naturalezas. Hablo del amor, no de la máscara, y no de las tonadas sobre el tema del amor, sino de la pasión; una llama que contiene en ella, como nuestra mortalidad, tanto la muerte como la vida, que puede o no ser duradera. Aplicada a sir Willoughby, como a miles de hombres civilizados, la piedra de toque lo encontró requiriéndole a su prometida que lo tratara como a un salvaje original. Se le requería que tocara incesantemente el primer acorde de reclamo que llevó a nuestro sátiro ancestral a los pasos de danza, al hilo del laberinto y a adecuarse a su pareja antes de que él lo devanara con ambas manos y talones rozagantes. Mantenerlo en el espanto y encadenado eran cosas que no debía hacer ni atreverse a decir ni debía pensar. Ella debía ser claustral. Por extraño y espantoso que parezca ese pensamiento, las mujeres percibían ese requisito con el espíritu del hombre; percibían también, y podía ser con gratitud, que llevaban a cabo su actuación menos para domar al *Monsieur* verde y travieso del bosque que para pacificar una glotonería vorazmente estética que las hacía anhelar insaciablemente, en todo momento, con alaridos de la lamentable letra «I», su pureza [29] . Es incierto que se den cuenta de que esa pureza tiene su fundamento en lo sensual y distingan al ultrarrefinado, pero lineal tataranieto de la Pezuña en ese apetito vasto y delicadamente exigente. Probablemente no; el daño es mayor, pues para apaciguar al glotón han de practicar el disimulo; a su manera son perdedoras como sus madres ancestrales. Sigue siendo lo palpable y material en ellas lo que están tentadas de que florezca, con lo que invitan a, y disuaden de, la persecución, una condición en la que languidece lo espiritual, donde residen sus esperanzas. La capacidad de fuerza en el alma de las mujeres detectará en última instancia una grosería infinita en la petición de una pureza infinita, de una floración inmaculada. Antes o después se darán cuenta de que han sido víctimas del Egoísta singular, de que han llevado una máscara de ignorancia para ser llamadas inocentes, de que se han convertido en producto de mercado para su delicia y han abandonado toda la mercancía al colmar el deseo por ella, de que han permitido que las devuelvan a una época pasada al aprovecharse de la inocencia carnal del accidente feliz para gratificar su celosa codicia de posesión, cuando su tarea habría debido consistir en poner el alma por encima de la fortuna más airosa y el don de la fuerza en las mujeres más allá de la blancura ornamental. ¿No son por naturaleza guerreras, como los hombres? Pero el voraz Egoísta masculino prefiere que sean preciosos vasos de metal pulido, inanimado y sobrecargado, recién salidos de la mano del artífice para llevarlos en sus manos, llamarlos suyos, beber de ellos, llenarlos y beber de ellos, olvidando que los han robado.

Este merodeo por un atajo no nos desvía de sir Willoughby Patterne y la señorita Clara Middleton. Él, un hombre tan inteligente y sensible, estaba ciego para lo que estaba pasando en el interior de ella y era suficientemente visible en la producción del artículo que él pedía a su sexo. Tuvo que dejar que la hermosa joven marchara a la capital del condado y su propósito fue llevarla a través de una enramada de laurel y complacerse en su suave confusión. Ella se resistió; decididamente volvió al césped. Sir Willoughby la comparó

con Constanza en la época del amor y se regocijó en su decepción. Vio a la Diosa Modestia custodiando la Pureza y nos atreveríamos a decir que no oyó los Preceptos, los antepasados maternos y paternos de la Pureza que aprobaban su conducta masticando ruidosamente con sus encías. Si nos preguntamos si un hombre sensible y enamorado puede ser tan ciego, nos veremos condenados a leer una y otra vez el párrafo anterior.

La señorita Middleton no estaba lo suficientemente instruida en la posición de su sexo como para saber que se encontraba en medio de la lucha de una de sus grandes batallas. Su posición personal, sin embargo, le proporcionaba rápidamente conocimiento, como una dolencia en nuestra constitución nos enseña lo que somos y cómo enfrentarnos a ella. ¿Podía casarse con ese hombre? Era evidentemente manejable. ¿Podía condescender a usar las artes de manejarlo para obtener una vida fácil de aplacar? ¡Qué cenagoso horror! Tan vívidamente inundó su fantasía la vista de ese cielo muerto sobre una tierra invariable que cerró los ojos con una colérica exclusión, como si la estuviera acechando, y casi tropezó con el joven Crossjay.

—Oh ¿la he lastimado? —exclamó el muchacho.

—No —dijo ella—. Ha sido culpa mía. Llévame a alguna parte, lejos de todos.

El muchacho la cogió de la mano y ella volvió a sus pensamientos. Apretando los dedos y sintiendo la calidez del joven Crossjay tanto por su presencia como por su silencio —de tal modo la sangre dirige la juventud, incluso la sangre fría e inocente, incluso con un roce—, se dijo a sí misma: «Y si me caso, entonces... ¿Dónde quedará el honor? Me caso con él por ser fiel a mi palabra de honor y entonces...». Una languidez intolerable la obligó a suspirar profundamente. Está escrito como lo pensó; lo pensó con espacios en blanco, como hacen las muchachas y algunas mujeres. Una sombra del Egoísta masculino las intimida en las cámaras de su alma.

«¡Casarme y escapar! Ese es el pensamiento; se lo ofrece a nuestra misericordia. Tratamos con una muchacha que se siente en una situación desesperada, no una loca».

—Estoy seguro de que está mortalmente cansada —dijo Crossjay.

—No, no lo estoy. ¿Qué te hace pensar así? —dijo Clara.

—Lo pienso.

—Pero ¿por qué?

—Está acalorada.

—¿Qué te hace pensar eso?

—Está roja.

—También tú, Crossjay.

—Solo tengo rojas las mejillas, salvo cuando corro. Además, habla sola, como los chicos cuando se enfurecen.

—¿Lo hacen?

—Se dicen a sí mismos cuando echan a correr: Sé que podría haberme quedado más tiempo. O dicen: Se me ha roto la hebilla.

—¿Te has dado cuenta de eso?

—Señorita Middleton, no querría que fuera usted un chico, pero me gustaría vivir cerca de usted toda mi vida y ser un caballero. He venido esta tarde con la señorita Dale a quedarme en la casa y que se ocupe de mí, en lugar de quedarme con su prima, que cuida a su padre. Podríamos jugar al ajedrez esta noche.

—Por la noche has de irte a la cama, Crossjay.

—No, si me coge sir Willoughby. Dice que soy una autoridad en huevos de pájaros. Puedo cuidar conejos y aves de corral. ¿No es feliz un granjero? Pero no se casa con damas. Un oficial de caballería tiene mejores oportunidades.

—Pero tú vas a ser oficial de marina.

—No lo sé. No es del todo así. Traeré mis dos lirones y les haré hacer gimnasia en la mesa. Son muy bonitos. Los oficiales de marina no son como sir Willoughby.

—No, no lo son —dijo Clara—. Dan su vida por su país.

—Y entonces se mueren —dijo Crossjay.

Clara deseó tener delante de ella a sir Willoughby: habría podido hablar.

Le preguntó al muchacho dónde estaba el señor Whitford. Crossjay señaló con sigilo en dirección al cerezo silvestre de doble floración. Clara contempló a Vernon tumbado y leyendo, suponía; dormido, descubrió: con un dedo en las hojas de un libro. ¿Qué libro? Sintió curiosidad por conocer el título del libro que Vernon leía debajo de esas ramas y, apretándole la mano a Crossjay, estiró el cuello, como si temiera caerse por un precipicio, para obtener una vislumbre de la página, pero enseguida, aún con la cabeza inclinada, volvió el rostro hacia donde el cúmulo de floración virginal, más blanco que una nube de verano en el cielo, se derramaba y colgaba y se arracimaba espesamente para adquirir color y parecía, como las nieves superiores de los Alpes a la luz del mediodía, un estallido de blanco. Sus ojos se posaron y elevaron a cielos cada

vez más elevados de blanco. El asombro cundió en ella. La felicidad por la belleza del árbol pugnó por sustituirlo y fue más mortal y estricta. Sobrevino la reflexión, que contrajo su visión y la devolvió a la tierra. Su reflexión fue esta: «¡Debe ser bueno aquel al que le gusta yacer y dormir bajo las ramas de este árbol!». Habría sido preferible que se quedara con la primera impresión: un asombro tan divino, tan ilimitado, era como elevarse a las moradas del espacio angelical, pasando de un hontanar a otro de blancura en innumerables columnas, pero pensarlo no equivalía a recuperarlo; igual habría podido esforzarse por ser una niña. La sensación de felicidad prometía ser más breve en la memoria y lo habría sido si el malestar por el anhelo de felicidad no hubiera arrasado todos sus rincones en busca del secreto de su existencia. La reflexión arraigó. «¡Debe ser bueno...!» Esa reflexión sería persistente. Pobre por comparación con lo que desplazaba, se le presentaba como si le concediera algo a Vernon y no habría querido que faltara aunque se lo hubiera robado a ella.

Miró hacia abajo. Vernon estaba mirando hacia arriba con aire soñador.

Se alejó corriendo con Crossjay, susurrando que habría sido mejor no despertar al señor Whitford, y luego se propuso invertir su caza anterior y ser ella el perro en lugar de la presa. Crossjay hizo una magnífica salida. Al mirar atrás vio a la señorita Middleton caminando sin fuerzas, con las manos caídas.

—¡Es una chica corriente! —dijo, algo disgustado, pues su teoría era que las chicas siempre se las arreglan para echar a perder el juego.

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29 *I,* en inglés, es, como ya hemos señalado, el pronombre de primera persona «Yo». *Monsieur* del bosque y (dos líneas más abajo) «Pezuña» se refieren al sátiro del mundo clásico.

XII

La señorita Middleton y el señor Vernon Whitford

MIRANDO hacia arriba, no del todo despierto de una siesta, una hermosa cabeza rodeada de una deslumbrante floración, podemos contemporizar con el sentido común y tomarlo por una visión una vez que los ojos han recobrado la dirección mental. Vernon lo hizo hasta que la plástica visión se entreveró de manera alarmante con la realidad. Es el abrazo de Melusina que pronto lo ocupará todo si se la alienta. Un ligero devaneo con ella hace que lo más diminuto parezca tan grande como la vida. Vernon se puso de pie de un salto, se aclaró la garganta, compuso el rostro y sacudió la tierra portadora de sueños con tremendas y largas zancadas, de modo que su sangre revitalizara el trono del entendimiento. La señorita Middleton y el joven Crossjay estaban al alcance de su voz: era su rostro el que había visto y, sin embargo, la idea de una visión, que su ingenio había captado, insistía una y otra vez en ser readmitida. Para un hombre humilde con el sexo había poco que pensar en el hecho de una joven que se inclinara para verlo dormir, salvo que el porte de su esbelta figura, con un aire de espía y de escucha, le recordó vivamente que la había comparado con Eco. Un hombre o una mujer que duermen al aire libre suscitan nuestra curiosidad. Es conocido que a los hombres en ese estado se les ha besado cruelmente y no se les conceden derechos; un rapto vaporoso se burla de ellos. Los pobres apenas adivinan lo que les ha pasado: desde entonces tienen el paso cambiado. Pero una visión no es tan turbadora; es nuestra, podemos dejarla a un lado y volver a ella, jugar a ricos y pobres con ella sin que nuestras leyes nos convoquen por albergarlas en nuestro tesoro. Además, es la llave de oro de todo lo posible: nuevos mundos se extienden bajo el amanecer que nos ha traído. Justo fuera de la realidad, ilumina, enriquece y mitiga todo lo real; desearla por encima del simple hecho es una prueba determinante de enervación.

Así dio por terminado Vernon su breve drama fantástico. Era consciente del elemento fantástico y pronto lo habría sometido. ¿Quién de nosotros que tenga algún valor carece de él? No era tan vanidoso como para preocuparse y la pasión estaba sosegada, por lo que su tarea no era gigantesca. Hay que señalar especialmente que era un hombre de paso rápido, el remedio soberano para dispersar la niebla mental. La había padecido y sabía que hay que desechar lo absurdo.

Hacia el extremo del parque el joven Crossjay lo alcanzó y, tras henchirse por ello algo más de lo necesario, exclamó:

—Señor Whitford, aquí está la señorita Middleton con su pañuelo.

—¿Para qué, muchacho? —dijo Vernon.

—No lo sé. Se lanzó de repente. ¡Fíjese lo que son las chicas! Ahí viene como si no hubiera pasado nada, pero yo la he visto.

Clara movía la cabeza para expresar su negativa.

—No me encuentro mal en absoluto —dijo al acercarse—. Me pregunto el motivo de Crossjay para correr hacia usted; es un muchacho entrometido. Estaba cansada y he descansado un momento.

Crossjay miró sus párpados. Vernon apartó la vista y dijo:

—¿Está cansada para dar un paseo?

—Ya no.

—¿A paso ligero?

—Usted me lleva.

Vernon le dio a sus piernas un ritmo que dobló el de las de Crossjay, pero, con sus rápidos pasos, Clara se mantuvo en línea con su hombro y Vernon lamentó pensar que, de todas las muchachas de la tierra, la hubieran escogido a ella para ocupar la posición de una joven dama.

—No me cansará —dijo ella en respuesta a su mirada.

—Me recuerda a los pequeños *bersaglieri* piamonteses en marcha.

—Los he visto llegar a Como desde Milán.

—Cubren una gran cantidad de terreno en un día si es llano. Necesitará otro paso para las montañas.

—No trato de bailar.

—Las montañas reducen enseguida las nociones románticas que tenemos de ellas.

—Las montañas doman los sueños lujuriosos, querrá decir. He visto cómo las conquistan. Puedo caminar lentamente. ¡Cualquier cosa por estar en lo alto!

—Vaya, ahí tiene el secreto del buen trabajo: caminar lentamente y mantener la pasión.

—Sí, cuando tenemos un propósito a la vista.

—Siempre lo tenemos.

—¿Los cautivos también?

—Más que el resto de nosotros.

¡Hombre ignorante! ¿Qué ocurre con las mujeres casadas miserablemente? ¿Qué propósito tienen esas desgraciadas cautivas a la vista? El horror las hace estremecerse y la vergüenza se repliega para contar su horror más íntimo.

—Lléveme de vuelta a las montañas, por favor, señor Whitford —dijo la señorita Middleton, llena de simpatía por él—. Los cautivos tienen la muerte a la vista, pero eso no es un propósito.

—¿Por qué no habrían de esperar los cautivos la liberación?

—Difícilmente de un tirano.

—Si está pensando en tiranos, tal vez sea como dice. ¿Mueren los tiranos?

—Las puertas de la prisión se abren y sale un esqueleto. Pero ¿por qué hablar de esqueletos? El nombre mismo de las montañas parece dar vida en comparación con cualquier otra cosa.

—Le aseguro —dijo Vernon con el fervor de un hombre que repara en una verdad real al conversar con una joven— que no es la primera vez que he pensado que usted estaría a gusto en los Alpes. Caminaría y escalaría igual que baila.

A ella le gustó que hablara de Clara Middleton y que hubiera pensado en ella; ofreciéndole una mirada amable, dándose cuenta apenas de que Vernon había enrojecido, dijo:

—Si habla de una manera tan estimulante imaginaré que estamos cerca de un ascenso.

—Me gustaría que fuera así —dijo él.

—Podemos llevarlo a cabo deteniéndonos sobre ello, ¿no cree?

—Podemos empezar a escalar.

—¡Oh! —Clara se contrajo sombríamente.

—¿Qué montaña será? —dijo Vernon con el tono más serio.

La señorita Middleton sugirió una montaña femenina primero, para probar.

—Y luego, si piensa lo suficientemente bien de mí, si no me caigo más de una vez ni pregunto más de diez veces cuánto queda para la cima, me gustaría que me promoviera para escalar un gigante.

Hablaron de las alturas menores de Suiza y la Estiria y se establecieron en el Tirol meridional. La joven prefería ese distrito para ejercer firmemente sus poderes de escalada porque amaba el color italiano y parecía una buena razón para la imaginación que había despertado en el señor Whitford.

—Aunque —dijo abruptamente— usted no sea tan italiano como francés.

Esperaba que fuera inglés, señaló.

—Por supuesto que es inglés... Sí.

Vernon moderó su asentimiento con una vacilante afirmación.

Ella le preguntó sorprendida por qué parecía dudar.

—Bueno, usted tiene pies franceses, por ejemplo; ingenio francés, impaciencia francesa —bajó la voz— y encanto.

—Y me gustan los cumplidos.

—Es posible. No era consciente de hacerlos.

—¿Y una disposición a la rebeldía?

—A desafiar la autoridad, al menos.

—Es un carácter terrible.

—Es un carácter en cualquier caso.

—¿Apropiado para una camarada alpina?

—Para la mejor de las camaradas en cualquier parte.

—No es una pieza escultórica para un salón: ¡eso es lo más que puede decirse! —dejó caer Clara con un suspiro dramático.

Si él hubiera estado dispuesto habría seguido con el tema por el placer que una criatura con remordimientos encuentra en ser vista desde fuera. Se difuminó. Tras un silencio, no pudo retomarlo y él era evidentemente indiferente, habiéndola diseccionado y catalogado como extranjera para su satisfacción. Con el tema pasó su momento festivo. Había olvidado a sir Willoughby; lo recordó y dijo:

—Usted conoció a la señorita Durham, señor Whitford.

Vernon respondió brevemente:

—Sí.

—¿Era...?

La pregunta la ruborizó y se desvaneció.

—Encantadora —dijo Vernon.

—¿Inglesa?

—Sí: el elegante estilo inglés.

—Muy valiente.

—Diría que tenía una clase de valentía.

—Se equivocó.

—No diría que no. Descubrió a un hombre más apropiado para ella, por fortuna no demasiado tarde. Estamos a merced de...

—¿No fue imperdonable?

—Lamentaría pensar así de cualquiera.

—Pero admite que se equivocó.

—Supongo que sí. Cometió un error y lo corrigió. Si no lo hubiera hecho, habría cometido un error mayor.

—El modo...

—Estuvo mal... hasta donde sabemos. El mundo no tiene tanto derecho a juzgar. Debía producirse entonces y ahora una falsa salida. Es mejor no pensar en ello, creo.

—¿A merced de qué estamos?

—Corrientes de sentimientos, nuestras naturalezas. Soy el último hombre en poder predicar al respecto: las jóvenes son un enigma para mí; imagino que han de tener una percepción natural del marido apropiado y lo contrario; si, además, tienen algo de valor, la consecuencia es que se complazcan consigo mismas.

—¿No han de rechazar el mal que hacen? —dijo la señorita Middleton.

—Dejémosles reflexionar por todos los medios; no harán daño a nadie con eso.

—Pero ¡traicionar la confianza!

—Si puede mantenerse la fe en la vida, todo saldrá bien.

—¡Y la crueldad y el perjuicio!

—Creo que si una joven me dijera que debe romper nuestro compromiso (no he pasado por esa prueba, pero supongámoslo) no pensaría que fuera cruel.

—Entonces no sería una pérdida.

—Y no lo pensaría por la siguiente razón: es imposible que una muchacha llegue a tomar esa resolución sin haber mostrado previamente señales de ello para ella misma... y el hombre con el que esté comprometida. Creo que no es justo comprometer a una muchacha más allá de una semana o dos, tiempo suficiente para que se prepare y para las amonestaciones.

—Si él siempre está pendiente de sí mismo es probable que no se dé cuenta de las señales —dijo la señorita Middleton.

Vernon no contestó y ella dijo rápidamente:

—Siempre será cruel. El mundo lo pensará. Es un acto de inconstancia.

—Si se conocieran antes de comprometerse.

—¿No es usted singularmente tolerante? —dijo ella.

A lo que Vernon respondió con un aire de cordialidad:

—En algunos casos es justo juzgar por los resultados. Dejaremos la severidad al historiador, obligado a ser un moralista profesional y a dejar las súplicas de la naturaleza humana fuera de consideración. La dama en cuestión podría ser censurada, pero no se habría roto ningún corazón y tendríamos cuatro felices en lugar de dos miserables.

La permanente afabilidad de su semblante apeló a Clara para que confirmara el juicio por resultados y ella asintió y dijo: «Cuatro», como anonadada.

Desde ese momento hasta que el joven Crossjay cayó en el camino desde un árbol, magullándose las piernas y quedándose con un labio colgante y una cara como el interior de una anguila desollada, Clara podría haber estado caminando por el desierto, sola, en comparación con el placer de la sociedad.

Llevaron al malhadado muchacho entre ambos, sujetándolo los dos, con la delicadeza de Clara y una naturaleza dulce que superaba cualquier prueba. Iban mano con mano con el pequeño muchacho como un médico y una enfermera profesionales.

XIII

El primer intento de libertad

El accidente de Crossjay fue solo otra prueba, como Vernon le dijo a la señorita Dale, de que el mucha cho era medio mono.

—¿Algo nuevo? —exclamó ella al ver cómo lo introducían en la casa, a la que acababa de llegar.

—Simplemente una continuación —dijo Vernon—. No es tan prensil como debiera. Probablemente confíe en el caso extremo en la cola que le han cortado. ¿Eres un hombre, Crossjay?

—¡Pensaba que lo era! —respondió Crossjay con la voz de un anciano y una mueca fantasmal por sonrisa abrumó a las compasivas damas.

La señorita Dale se hizo cargo de él.

—Ha errado usted en la otra dirección —le señaló a Vernon.

—Pero un poco de rudeza es mejor que echarlo a perder —dijo la señorita Middleton.

No obtuvo respuesta y pensó: «¡Cualquier cosa que haga Willoughby está bien para esta dama!».

La impresión de Clara se renovó cuando sir Willoughby se sentó al lado de la señorita Dale esa tarde; desde luego no lo había visto brillar de una manera tan pintoresca como en su comportamiento con la señorita Dale. Las alegres salidas de ambos, su manera de estar juntos, su risa y los hermosos ojos de Leticia, y los gestos encantadores de Willoughby, llamaron la atención como una pareja de contendientes dispuesta a ejercer su mutua habilidad con los floretes. El propósito de Willoughby era que ella admirase la ejecución; era cualquier cosa excepto obtuso; al disfrutar la contienda como lo hizo y desempeñar necesariamente una parte tan excelente en ella se proponía que el observador viera al hombre que era con una dama cuya inteligencia no era roma. Fue así día tras día hasta tres.

Clara imaginó que había detectado la agradable excitación de unos celos incipientes sin haberla encontrado ni en su corazón ni en su mente, sino en el libro de los deseos, que los jóvenes conocen bien y en el que escriben cosas que a veces son independientes de esos álbumes volcánicos. Los celos habrían sido un descanso para ella, un alivio del demonio. Estudió el aspecto de los celos para engañarse a sí misma con la sensación de tenerlos y no dejó de reírse, como en un mal teatro en el que la imperfección de la maquinaria escénica, más que la actuación, es la fuente desgraciada de la diversión.

Vernon la había deprimido profundamente. La figura 4 la había *cazado* . *Cuatro felices en lugar de dos miserables* . Vernon lo había dicho, incluyéndola entre los cuatro, y así debía ser, consideraba Clara, y debía ser tan feliz como pudiera, pues no solo era Vernon incapaz de darse cuenta de su situación, sino de imaginar otras circunstancias que la rodeaban. Para ser justos con él, ¿cómo podía imaginarlas o imaginárselas nadie?

El horrible aislamiento de su secreto en un mundo amable que no sospechaba nada la asustaba. Desprenderse de su secreto, conformarse, no ser rebelde ni crítica, someterse, convertirse en un deseo impaciente... La tarea no parecía tan difícil desde la llegada de la señorita Dale. Las muestras de cariño se habían vuelto más raras, más formales; al vivir sin ser molestada ni avergonzada corporalmente y, como ella misma lo formulaba, sin que nadie se preocupase por ella, se volvió insensiblemente hacia la dirección debida; inconscientemente imitaba la obsequiosidad de la señorita Dale. Para decir la verdad, se sintió vivaz de un modo moderado con Willoughby tras verlo con la señorita Dale. La libertad tomó el aspecto de un imponente muro de prisión; la desesperada empresa de escalar por un lado y dejarse caer al otro era más de lo que ella, sin ayuda, podía resolverse a hacer; en consecuencia, como nadie se preocupaba por ella, una criatura indigna puede dejar de soñar y de estipular el cumplimiento de sus sueños; habría podido entregarse a su destino: hacerlo lo mejor posible.

Sir Willoughby estaba halagado y satisfecho. La vivacidad que Clara había adoptado demostró su firme conocimiento de la naturaleza femenina; la debilidad de Clara para sostenerlo no le disgustó. Una mirada suya fija lo había consternado no hacía mucho y le confortaron las señales de su ineficiencia donde él había destacado. Tanto el esfuerzo como el fracaso eran un buen augurio.

Pero ella no podía seguir con el intento. Willoughby la había sobrecargado demasiado con el simulacro de un sentimiento que reforzara y tuviera un lugar aparentemente natural entre sus impulsos y entonces le sobrevivo la idea de que Willoughby podía, podía esperarse que lo hiciera, ver en la señorita Dale, por contraste, la compañera que buscaba; por contraste con una criatura irresponsable como ella misma, tal vez descubriera en las dotes mayores de la señorita Dale y en su devoción por él el mérito de la adecuación, lo que

podría inducirlo a hacerle justicia. Por tenue que fuera la posibilidad, Clara se fijo en ella hasta lograr la luz. Como preludio a la acción, se hundió en un estado de tan profunda humildad que acusarla de simulación sería aventurado, aunque no fuera favorable. El temperamento de las jóvenes es fuego líquido en islas de arenas movedizas; los metales preciosos no se han enfriado en tierra sólida. Su compasión por Leticia fue menos forzada, pero su abatimiento era serio, pues últimamente no había sido brillante ni se había adecuado a los requisitos ordinarios de la conversación. No tenía valor, ni ingenio, ni diligencia, nada que pudiera distinguir salvo el descontento, como un ácido corrosivo, y fue tanto más sincera cuanto curiosa al sentir lástima por el hombre con el que se había comprometido. Estaba segura de que, aunque se correspondiera con su propósito sentir lástima por sir Willoughby, no lo hacía por conveniencia; sus necesidades estaban en su naturaleza, como sus estados de ánimo; tenía la capacidad de que todo le sirviera al pasar por una mirada que discernía su utilidad y así es como los jóvenes, cuando están en apuros, sin elevarse a una hipocresía científica, pueden dar lecciones prácticas de hipocresía.

—¿Por qué no habría Willoughby de ser feliz? —dijo, y la explicación vino con el segundo pensamiento —. Entonces seré libre.

Sin embargo, ese pensamiento fue el segundo.

El deseo de que Willoughby fuera feliz era fervoroso y la alejó de amigos y cartas a un angosto valle tirolés, donde corría un riachuelo, con hendidura de un ejército en columna visto de lejos, topacio entre guijarros, hasta hoyos de esmeralda arrebatadores. Allí residía la Libertad, tras haber saltado el muro de la prisión, en paz para contemplar el agua y la caída del sol sobre la montaña, entre sombras de pino. El deseo de Clara de que Willoughby fuera feliz, una vez lo hubo albergado en la imaginación de su libertad, era de una pureza que le hacía pensar que era extremadamente fácil hablar de él.

Sir Willoughby le ofreció la oportunidad. Todas las mañanas, tras el desayuno, la señorita Dale cruzaba el parque para ver a su padre y en esa ocasión sir Willoughby y la señorita Middleton fueron con ella hasta el lago, discurriendo los tres sobre la belleza de algunos árboles, abedules, álamos temblones, chopos, hayas, entonces con hojas nuevas. La señorita Dale amaba los álamos, la señorita Middleton las hayas, sir Willoughby los abedules y cada uno de ellos dijo cosas bonitas en alabanza de su objeto favorito, en particular la señorita Dale. Tanto fue así que, cuando se hubo ido, sir Willoughby recordó una de sus observaciones y dijo:

—Creo que, si todo el lugar fuera arrasado mañana, Leticia Dale lo reconstruiría y pondría los álamos al norte del lago en la misma cantidad y situación en que están ahora. Yo garantizaría la corrección de su descripción en su ausencia.

—¿Por qué habría de estar ausente? —dijo Clara, palpitante.

—¿Por qué? —contestó sir Willoughby—. Como tú dices, no hay ninguna razón. El arte de la vida, y la mía es sobre todo una vida rural (la ciudad no es vida, sino un tornado de átomos que gira), el arte consiste en asociar a un grupo de amigos afines en nuestra vecindad y es un hecho digno de ser observado que, si alguna vez me cansara del lugar, una breve charla con Leticia Dale me refrescaría más que un mes o dos en el continente. Suyo es el manantial del entusiasmo. Hay una gran ventaja en tener a una persona cultivada a nuestra disposición con la que poder conversar de cualquier tema bajo el sol. Repito que no tenemos necesidad de la ciudad si tenemos amigos como Leticia Dale a los que llamar. Mi madre la estimaba mucho.

—Willoughby, no está obligada a irse.

—Espero que no y, amor mío, me alegra que le hayas cogido cariño. La salud de su padre es pobre. Sería una joven solterona solitaria en una casita de campo.

—¿Qué hay de tus planes?

—El viejo Vernon está loco.

—¿Ha declinado?

—¡Ni una palabra al respecto! Solo tengo que proponerlo para sufrir un desaire, lo sé.

—Tal vez no seas consciente de lo rudo que has sido.

—Nada parece enseñarle el arte de dialogar con las damas.

—¿No se vuelven vergonzosos los caballeros cuando son eclipsados?

—No lo ha sido, amor mío. Vernon es deficiente en la lengua femenina.

—Lo respeto por eso.

—¿Eclipsado, dices? ¡No sé de ningún resplandor, salvo uno, que me ilumina, el camino y la persona!

Le hizo saber la identidad de ese resplandor mediante una inclinación y una suave presión.

—No solo carece de la lengua femenina, que sostengo que es un logro propio del hombre —prosiguió sir Willoughby—, sino que no puede aducir sus ventajas a su favor. La señorita Dale ha estado cuatro días con él en casa. Estaban en pie de igualdad cuando ella llegó. ¿Lo preguntas? Te lo diré. Es así: es falta de calidez. El viejo Vernon es un erudito y un muermo. Bueno, tal vez tenga motivos para ser vergonzoso con el matrimonio, pero es un muermo.

—¿Te has reconciliado con que se vaya?

—¡Falsa alarma! La resolución de hacer algo desacostumbrado está más allá del viejo Vernon.

—Pero si el señor Oxford... Whitford... Tus cisnes surcan el lago, ¡qué hermosos parecen cuando se enfadan! Iba a preguntarte si los hombres que son testigos de una marcada admiración por alguien más se desalientan de un modo natural.

Sir Willoughby se puso tieso con una iluminación repentina. Aunque no se había mencionado la palabra celos, la deriva de sus observaciones era clara. Sonriendo para sí, dijo, y las frases no fueron enigmáticas para ella:

—Seguramente, también las jóvenes, ¿un poco? ¿Demasiado? Pero ¡una vieja amistad! Igual que un viejo guante encaja en la mano. La mano y el guante solo tienen que encontrarse. Donde hay una armonía natural no encontrarás discordia. Ah pero la tendrás si pones a prueba la armonía. ¡Mi querida muchacha! ¡Chiquilla!

En realidad, por medio de esta parabólica y admirable oscuridad, que Clara agradeció de corazón, Willoughby había tocado el punto que ella no había mencionado y no quería que se mencionase, pero que deseaba que él tocase. La exultación de Willoughby, comprimida, fue extrema al oírla exclamar:

—Tal vez las jóvenes. Oh no, yo no. Puedo convencerte. No es eso. Créeme, Willoughby. No sé lo que es sentir eso ni nada parecido. No puedo imaginar una exigencia sobre la vida de nadie, como exigencia, ni la continuación de un compromiso que no se base en la perfecta, *perfecta,* simpatía. ¿Cómo iba a sentirlos, entonces? Como tú dices del señor Ox-, Whitford, están más allá de mí.

Sir Willoughby captó el Ox-Whit-ford.

Rompiendo a reír de orgullo, trazó un retrato del viejo Vernon en sociedad. Ella pensaba algo elevadamente de Vernon, como aquí y allá una joven piensa de los amigos de su prometido, lo que supone desperdiciar una sustancia que propiamente le corresponde, por decirlo así, en el sentido más elevado, un gasto en genuflexiones ante ídolos de paso de una reverencia que Clara debía llevar intacta al templo. La burla la instruye.

Del otro tema —los celos de Clara— Willoughby no tenía deseos de oír más. Ella se había apenado: la mujer había sido rozada y se dolía la muchacha. Era suficiente. Clara lo intentó una vez más, pero débilmente, y su detenimiento la dejó fuera. Podía haberse mordido la lengua con ese reiterado y estúpido lapsus con el nombre de Whitford y, como era completamente inocente, persistió en preguntarse cómo podía ser culpable de ello.

—¿Conocéis los dos los nombres botánicos de esas flores silvestres? —dijo.

—¿Quiénes?

—Tú y la señorita Dale.

Sir Willoughby se encogió de hombros. Le divertía.

—Ninguna mujer se mostrará tan exquisita en la calesa como mi Clara.

—¿Dónde? —dijo ella.

—Durante mis dos meses anuales en Londres. Conduzco entonces una calesa y me atrevo a profetizar que mi equipaje suscitará la mayor excitación en Londres. Veo al viejo Horacio De Craye en contemplación.

Clara suspiró. No podía atraerlo a la palabra ni a un asomo de lo que necesitaba.

Pero allí estaba; lo había visto. Casi lo había dejado pasar y se sonrojó al verse obligada a mencionarlo.

—¿Te refieres a los celos, Willoughby? ¿La gente de Londres se pondrá celosa? ¿El coronel De Craye? ¡Qué extraño! Es un sentimiento que no puedo entender.

Sir Willoughby gesticuló el «No, por supuesto» dando por supuesto lo contrario.

—Es cierto, Willoughby, no puedo.

—Desde luego que no.

Había caído en la trampa y se imaginaba que estaba anatomizando su naturaleza femenina.

—¿Puedo darte una prueba, Willoughby? Soy tan completamente incapaz de sentirlos, escúchame, que si vinieras a decirme, como podrías hacer, que la señorita Dale te parece mucho más apropiada que yo, y me temo que no lo soy, habríamos de decirlo llanamente, por completo inapropiada, tal vez, te ruego que me creas, debes creerme, te daría, te daría inmediatamente la libertad, de la manera más sincera, y me comprometería a hablar de ti como debiera pensar de ti. Willoughby, nadie te alabaría en público o en privado como yo lo haría, pues serías para mí el más honesto, sincero y cortés caballero vivo. En ese caso, declararía que ella no te admira más que yo: la señorita Dale no lo haría; no te admiraría más que yo, ¡ni siquiera la señorita Dale!

Ese primer salto directo a la libertad la dejó jadeante, y tenía tanto que decir que las mitades nerviosa e intelectual de sí misma chocaron como címbalos, aturdiéndola y atontándola con la pertinencia de las cosas que deben decirse y dejándola en la indecisión respecto a lo astuto que podría ser él.

Se había revelado la condición de los celos femeninos.

Willoughby la había llevado más lejos de lo que se había propuesto.

—Ven, déjame calmar esos... —la tranquilizó con la mano y la voz mientras buscaba la frase— esos magníficos detalles. Ahora, ¡Clara mía!, ¡por mi honor!, y cuando lo firme, mi honor tiene el sentido más serio que pueda tener; de ordinario mi palabra basta para vínculos, promesas o afirmaciones, ¡por mi honor! No solo no hay motivos de sospecha, ¡pobre chiquilla mía!, te aseguro, lo declaro, el hecho es precisamente el opuesto. Atiende; no puedo hablar de sus sentimientos; hasta donde sé no los he originado, no soy responsable de ellos y soy, ante la ley, como podríamos decir, ignorante al respecto, esto es, no he oído nunca una declaración y estoy, por tanto, bajo pena del estigma de una fatuidad excesiva, obligado a desconocerlos. Pero en lo que a mí respecta, puedo hablar por mí mismo, y, ¡por mi honor!, Clara (para ser tan directo como sea posible, hasta la desnudez, y sabes que la detesto), no podría, repito, *¡no podría casarme con Leticia Dale!* Deja que lo imprima sobre ti. Ninguna adulación (todos somos más o menos susceptibles), ninguna condición concebible podría producirlo, ninguna admiración. Ella y yo somos excelentes amigos; no podemos ser más. Cuando nos ves juntos, nuestra concordia natural es, por supuesto, equívoca. Es una mujer de genio. No oculto que le profeso admiración. Confieso que hay momentos en que le pido a Leticia que llame mi atención, que dé y tome. Estoy en deuda con ella por el gozo del dúo que pocos conocen, que pocos pueden acordar, menos aún permitirse el privilegio de interpretar con un ser humano. Confieso que estoy en deuda y que siento una profunda gratitud. Confieso una viva amistad con la señorita Dale, pero si a ella le disgusta la vista de mi prometida... un pestañeo... entonces...

El brazo de sir Willoughby lanzó a la señorita Dale a las tinieblas exteriores del desierto.

Clara cerró los ojos y sus órbitas giraron en un frenesí de revuelta impronunciada.

Pero no se había comprometido con el coloquio para ser una abogada de la señorita Dale ni de la humanidad corriente.

—¡Ah! —dijo, decidiendo simplemente que no dejaba caer el tema.

—Y ah —se burló él tiernamente—. ¡Cierto, sin embargo! ¿Quién sabe mejor que mi Clara que pido juventud, salud, belleza y los demás atributos indefinibles que casen con los míos y convengan a la situación de la dama llamada a presidir mi casa y representarme? ¿Qué dice mi otra mitad, la más hermosa? ¡Eres tú, amor mío, eres tú! Entiende correctamente mi naturaleza y tú...

—¡Lo hago! ¡Lo hago! —repuso Clara—. Si no lo hiciera ahora sería idiota. Déjame asegurarte que la entiendo. ¡Oh! Escúchame un momento. La señorita Dale me considera la mujer más feliz de la tierra. Willoughby, si yo tuviera sus cualidades, su corazón e inteligencia, sin duda lo sería. Mi deseo, debes oírme, debes oír lo que tengo que decir, mi deseo, mi deseo más firme, mi plegaria ardiente, mi deseo es dejarle el camino libre. Ella te aprecia: yo no, para mi vergüenza, yo no. Ella te adora: yo no, no puedo. Tú eres para ella el sol naciente. Ha sido así durante años. Nadie puede explicar el amor: me atrevo a decir no por la imposibilidad de amar... Amar donde debamos; el amor me desconcierta. No he sido creada para entenderlo. Pero ella te ama, languidece. Creo que el amor ha destruido la salud que pides como una entrada en tu lista. Pero tú, Willoughby, puedes restaurarla. Viajar y... y tu compañía, el placer de tu compañía la restaurará. ¡Sois tan encantadores juntos! Su devoción es ilimitada; en lo que a mí respecta no puedo idolatrar. Veo los defectos; los veo todos los días. Me aturden y lastiman. Tu orgullo no toleraría oír hablar de ellos, menos aún a tu mujer. Me advertiste que tuviera cuidado, eso es, lo dijiste, dijiste algo.

Su ocupado cerebro echó a perder el subterfugio que cubría el desliz de la lengua.

Sir Willoughby contraatacó:

—¡Y si dijera que toda la concatenación se basa en una observación errónea de los hechos y en una deducción errónea de esa observación errónea! No, no. Confía en mí. Te lo propongo en este instante, solo para salvarte de la decepción. ¿Tienes frío, amor mío? ¿Estás temblando?

—No tengo frío —dijo Clara—. Alguien, supongo, está caminando sobre mi tumba.

El abismo de una caricia asomó a lo lejos como una enorme nube tras una cresta.

Se inclinó hacia un ranúnculo; el monstruo pasó.

—¡Tu tumba! —exclamó Willoughby por encima de la cabeza de Clara—. ¡Niña mía!

—¿No es la orquídea extranjera en un terreno tan lejano de la caliza, Willoughby?

—Soy incompetente para dar una opinión sobre cuestiones tan importantes. A mi madre le apasionaba la descripción de las flores. Imagino algún recuerdo de ella recogiendo la flor que mencionas en el parque.

—¡Si ella viviera!

—Seríamos felices con la bendición de la más estimable de las mujeres, Clara mía.

—Me habría escuchado. Se habría dado cuenta de lo que quiero decir.

—Seguro, Clara. ¡Pobre alma! —dijo para sí en voz alta—. Estás absolutamente equivocada. Si he parecido... Pero, repito, te engañas. La idea de *adecuación* es una completa alucinación. Te supongo (incluso como juego resulta doloroso) desviada por entero, sin pensar en...

—Extinta —dijo Clara en voz baja.

—Inexistente para mí —escogió un término preferible—. Suponlo; a pesar de la admiración, nunca he pensado que tuviera que ocultar, aún soy (lo digo enfáticamente) *completamente incapaz de ofrecerle mi mano a la señorita Dale* . Tal vez se haya metido en mi cabeza como una amiga y nada más que una amiga. Recibí esa impresión en la primera juventud. La gente lo advirtió, al parecer llamábamos la atención, como un reflejo, un contrarreflejo.

Clara lo miró con una satisfacción llena de inteligencia al ver que su lanza le había golpeado.

—Así es: es una observación común —dijo Clara—. Cualquiera puede darse cuenta de la diferencia instantánea cuando ella se acerca.

—Amor mío —abrió la cancela de hierro del jardín—, haces grande una sospecha insignificante.

—Pero es una hermosa vista, Willoughby. Me gusta veros juntos. Me gusta como me gusta ver colores que emparejan.

—Muy bien. No hay daño, entonces. Estaremos juntos con frecuencia. Me gusta mi hermosa amiga. Pero ¡al momento! Solo tienes que expresar un sentimiento de desaprobación.

—Y la despides.

—La despido. Esto es, literalmente, me constituiré en tu eco para aclarar cualquier vestigio de sospecha. Se marcha.

—Es un caso de persona condenada a la extinción sin ofensa.

—No sin ofensa, pues cualquiera que ofenda a mi prometida, a mi esposa, a mi soberana, me ofende: me ofende profundamente.

—Entonces los caprichos de tu esposa...

Clara puso su pie sin darse cuenta en el césped, que se mostró irresponsablemente suave a su inquietud. Turbada por el inconsecuente manso tono de ironía, dijo:

—Willoughby, las mujeres pueden jurar por su honor igual que los hombres, las muchachas pueden hacerlo: han de jurar ante el altar. ¿Puedo hacerlo ante ti ahora? Dalo por sentado cuando te digo que nada me haría tan feliz como tu unión con la señorita Dale. He dicho cuanto podía decir. Dime que me liberas.

Con la conocida sonrisa fingida del deber manteniendo el desengaño hasta la inanición, Willoughby respondió:

—Déjame reiterarte una vez más que es repulsivo, inconcebible, que yo *nunca, en ninguna circunstancia mortal, me vea a mí mismo tomando a la señorita Dale por esposa.* Me reduces a esta protesta perfectamente infantil, ¡deplorablemente infantil! Pero, amor mío, ¿he de recordarte que tú y yo estamos comprometidos y que soy un hombre de honor?

—¡Lo sé, lo siento, libérame! —exclamó Clara.

Sir Willoughby se reprochó severamente su corta visión por no ver salvo el objeto más cercano en la atención particular que había prestado a la señorita Dale. No podía negar que habían sido señalados, con un objeto, y le turbó la imprevista falta de sabiduría con la que había sido llevado a pasarlo por alto. Su propósito de excitar un toque de la insana emoción en el pecho de Clara había tenido demasiado éxito y «No estaba pensando en ella», dijo candorosamente, contrito.

Ella exclamó de nuevo:

—¿Me liberarás, Willoughby?

Willoughby le pidió que cogiera su brazo.

Consentir en tocarlo mientras le pedía una separación le pareció discordante a Clara, pero, aunque ella esperaba que accediera, era justo que hiciera cuanto pudiera y le dio la mano, distante. Él la tomo y dijo:

—El doctor Middleton está en la biblioteca. Veo que Vernon está trabajando con Crossjay en la sala oeste. El muchacho ha tenido suficiente por hoy. Pero ¿es posible que el viejo Vernon le lleve sus libros a una cabeza rota antes de que se cure?

Señaló en dirección al joven Crossjay, que pasó por las ventanas en un parpadeo.

—Ve y háblale a Vernon de la dama en cuestión —le susurró sir Willoughby a Clara—. Usa toda tu persuasión en nuestro nombre. Tienes mi permiso para decir que el dinero no importa; casa e ingresos están asegurados. No me tomaste en serio cuando te pedí que comprometieras a Vernon primero. Lo decía tan en serio como ahora. Yo prepararé a la señorita Dale. No tendré una boda en *nuestro* día de boda, pero antes o después me alegrará acelerar su alianza. Creo que ahora te doy la mayor prueba posible y, aunque sé que con las mujeres un desengaño puede considerarse infundado y seguir siendo grato, confío en tu buen sentido.

Vernon estaba en la puerta vidriera y se apartó para que ella entrara. Sir Willoughby insistió gentilmente. Clara inclinó la cabeza como si estuviera entrando en una cueva. Estaba tan frígida que un ridículo temor de llamar señor Oxford al señor Whitford era su única ansiedad cuando sir Willoughby cerró la puerta tras ellos.

XIV

Sir Willoughby y Leticia

«Yo prepararé a la señorita Dale».

Sir Willoughby pensó en la promesa que le había hecho a Clara. Conversó un rato con el joven Crossjay, luego despidió al muchacho y se sumió en una meditación. Podemos ver muchas estatuas semejantes de estadistas que han muerto en guardia por su país.

En el capítulo ciento cuatro del volumen decimotercero del Libro del Egoísmo está escrito: *La posesión sin obligaciones con el objeto poseído se acerca a la felicidad.*

Es la condición más rara de la propiedad. Por ejemplo, la posesión de la tierra no carece de obligaciones con el terreno y el recaudador de impuestos; la posesión de ropa hermosa está oprimida por la obligación: oro, joyas, obras de arte, muebles domésticos envidiables son cadenas; la posesión de una esposa está llena de obligaciones. En todos estos casos, la posesión es un término amable para la esclavitud y otorga la clase de felicidad propia de un ilota borracho. Tendremos el gozo, el orgullo, la intoxicación de la posesión: no tendremos el alma libre.

Pero hay un ejemplo de posesión, perfecto, que nos deja libres, sin sombra de obligaciones, recibiendo siempre, sin dar nunca o, si tenemos que dar, dando de lo que derrochamos; por decirlo así *(sauf votre respect)* en forma de transpiración, de radiación, si queremos, abundancia de los poros; un proceso beneficioso para el sistema. Poseer el culto de una adoración femenina es ese ejemplo.

La suave y querida parsi no se encuentra casi nunca salvo postrada. No anhela otra cosa sino que sigamos siendo... su sol, lo cual es nuestro firme empeño constitucional, de modo que así tenemos la alianza más precisa: ella proporciona espíritu a nuestra materia, presentando al mismo tiempo materia a nuestro espíritu, un añadido muy cómodo. Los dioses lo bendicen.

Que lo hacen es evidente por los hombres que escogen para esa feliz corona y aureola. Los débiles se pondrían nerviosos con la adulación del culto de una mujer o por devolverlo, al menos parcialmente, como si pudiera intercambiarse sin que se secara la poesía, o serían dignos de lamentar y lo echarían todo a perder. Algunos preferirían transformar la hermosa y solitaria llama vestal con el primer esfuerzo de la tabla de multiplicar en un afecto doméstico [30] . Esos no son los hombres a quienes los dioses escogen, sino más bien a hombres de una pieza, elevados y sólidos, que mantengan la corona sosteniéndola con independencia de la gran emoción que han suscitado.

Incluso para ellos hay un peligro, como veremos en la muestra de uno de los más elevados.

Un claro acercamiento a la felicidad había sido desde hacía mucho la parte que sir Willoughby Patterne se había llevado en sus relaciones con Leticia Dale. Ella le pertenecía; él estaba libre de ella. Ella era todo lo bueno que hay en un parásito sin nada malo. Era su crítica devota, que lo examinaba con un favor igual a la perfecta eficiencia en su oficio y, fuera lo que fuera lo que el mundo dijera de él, el feliz caballero podía volver a ella constantemente para su refrescante baño balsámico. Ella le llegaba al corazón, suscitando gratamente sensaciones, y él le concedía el derecho a hacerlo, a la manera de los reyes, como hemos oído decir, consintiéndole los privilegios de los gatos. No se pueden dirigir a sus majestades, pero pueden mirar; no puede negarse que los atentos ojos circulares de las humildes criaturas domésticas son un embellecimiento de la pompa y la grandeza reales, de manera que un día se ganen ser tejidos y figurar —en lugar de las abejas, el armiño y sus diversas decoraciones— en las amplias vestiduras rozagantes que han de recoger los pobres pajes.

Para volver a citar del mismo volumen del Libro: *Es doloroso renunciar a lo que abandonamos de buen grado.*

La idea está demasiado exquisitamente atenuada, como lo están todas las del guardián del corazón del Egoísmo y se nos escurrirá salvo que hayamos estudiado los gruesos volúmenes de las secciones primera y segunda del libro, lo que nos llevaría a la senilidad, o nos adentremos personalmente en las páginas, al azar, o salgamos de ellas. Hubo una vez un honorable caballero a quien le creció un pelo blanco en la punta de su nariz y se reía cuando se movía. Al final se resignó y contemplaba largamente la aparición. No nos concierne qué efecto produjo en su rostro y en su mente; es suficiente con que viera una cosa hermosa, pero no tanto como lo que hemos mencionado, lo cual ha estado entre los dos ojos de la humanidad desde que se ha buscado a las mujeres para el matrimonio. Para aquel viejo caballero puede haber sido un pelo fantasmal o una enfermedad de los nervios ópticos, pero para nosotros es un crecimiento real y la humanidad podría imi-

tar con provecho su paciente especulación al respecto.

Sir Willoughby Patterne, aunque dispuesto a cumplir el deber y la conveniencia (una pareja unida con frecuencia) de alejar a la señorita Dale, tuvo que considerar que no estaba, por decirlo así, empujándola hacia un seto, sino que la estaba arrojando en los brazos de un hombre y eso era una prueba mucho mayor que en otras ocasiones en las que ella había dado tumbos. En brazos de un marido no podía saberse cuándo olvidaría la fidelidad de su alma. No le había dolido esbozar el proyecto de la conjunción; le asistía la benevolencia, pero le dolió mucho ver que cobraba forma. Mancillaba su idea de Leticia.

Sin embargo, si, a pesar de un cambio tan grande en la fortuna de la señorita Dale, podía mantenerse su espíritu a salvo de cambios, para pacificar a su prometida y mantener a dos personas serviciales cerca de él a su mando, podía decidirse a unirlas. La visión de su decisión se empañó con un pálido desprecio de la mujer físicamente desleal; no es extraño que acudiera al libro y lo abriera por los sofocantes capítulos que tratan del sexo y las execrables artimañas de esa importante criatura de caza, que lucha por vivir. No se escatima en el Mayor de los Libros. Pero cerrémoslo.

Han sido los hombres quienes sobre todo han escrito en ese libro y son los hombres los que naturalmente reciben fortificación de su sabiduría. Media docena de las populares frases que confunden a las mujeres (forjadas en un bronce semejante a un pulido oro sombrío) alentaron el empeño de sir Willoughby.

Un examen del rostro descolorido de Leticia lo respaldó cordialmente.

¿Tenía su Clara celos de esa pobre hoja?

Podría haber deseado la transfusión de una o dos cualidades de Leticia a su novia, pero no podemos, como en la cocina, obtener una mezcla de las esencias de esas criaturas y si, como es posible hacer, y como sir Willoughby había hecho recientemente con las dos en la casa, las metemos en una olla, es mucho más probable que intensifiquemos sus pequeñas señas natales de identidad. Si tuvieran una tendencia a la excelencia sería de otra manera; entonces podrían hacer los intercambios que deseáramos o juntarse científicamente en un harén durante una extensión de tiempo suficiente como para confundir a un sultán. Sin embargo, es infructuoso demorarse en lo que solo era un destello de un pesar salvaje, como el cruce de dos trenes expreso a lo largo de los raíles de la cabeza de sir Willoughby.

Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel estaban sentadas con la señorita Dale, las tres con su labor de encaje. Willoughby solo tuvo que fijarse en la señorita Eleanor. Se levantó. Miró a la señorita Isabel e hizo de *châtelaine* para justificar su partida. Tras un intervalo decente la señorita Isabel se marchó. Así era la perfecta disciplina de la casa.

Sir Willoughby repiqueteó con los dedos sobre la rodilla de su pierna cruzada.

Leticia captó el significado del silencio. Dijo:

—¿No le han turbado los asuntos hoy?

—Los asuntos —contestó él— han de ser peculiarmente enojosos para turbarme. ¿Los del país o los personales?

—Supongo que aludía a los del país.

—Confío en ser tan buen patriota como cualquiera —dijo—, pero estoy acostumbrado a las locuras de mis conciudadanos y vamos a bordo de un buen barco. En lo peor, no es peor que una subida de tasas e impuestos; humo a la puerta de casa, tal vez; permiso para recoger leña en las arboledas exteriores o unas docenas de carga de carbón. Ha tocado usted mi feudalismo.

—El caballero con armadura ha desaparecido —dijo Leticia— y el castillo con el puente levadizo. También la inmunidad para nuestra isla desde que escogimos el comercio.

—Trocamos la independencia por el comercio. Ha tocado nuestra vieja controversia. ¡Ay pero no queremos esta población creciente! Sin embargo, pongamos a un lado la política y la sociología y todo el paquete de sus modernas palabras. Me ha interpretado usted intuitivamente. No diré que estoy enojado, sino alterado. Tengo mucho que hacer e ir al Parlamento me dejará casi indefenso si pierdo a Vernon. ¿Sabe cuál es su absurda idea? La fama literaria, habitaciones de soltero, asadores y todo lo demás.

Lo sabía y, pensando de otra manera en cuestiones de fama literaria, se ruborizó y, avergonzada de ruborizarse, frunció el ceño.

Willoughby se inclinó hacia ella con la minuciosa seriedad de un caballero ante lo trivial.

—¿No se propondría fruncir el ceño?

—¿Lo he hecho?

—Lo ha hecho.

—¿Ahora?

—Con fuerza.

—¡Oh!

—¿Sonreirá para tranquilizarme?

—Claro, hasta donde pueda.

Willoughby se puso sombrío. Con ninguna mujer en la tierra brillaba para considerarse señor y dama de una vieja corte francesa como lo hacía con Leticia Dale. No quería revivir el periodo, pero lo reservaba como un jardín en el que distraerse cuando tenía ganas de mostrar elegancia y brillantez en compañía de una dama y, de palabra, Leticia lo ayudaba a la hermosa ilusión. No carecía de gracia ni de porte.

¿Preservaría ella su hermosa capacidad de respuesta para su ascendencia? Hasta ahora lo había hecho, y durante años, y hacía poco. Pero ¿cómo sería como una mujer casada? ¡Nuestras almas están odiosamente sometidas a las condiciones de nuestra naturaleza animal! De una esposa, posible madre, era una sobria estimación pensar que experimentara grandes cambios. La insinuación de cualquier cambio parecía un cambio completo a alguien del elevado orden que, cuando se le pide que renuncie a la posesión en lugar de aspirar a ella, dice: ¡Todo o nada!

Bueno, pero si había un peligro de que el vínculo del matrimonio produjera la menor alteración de su carácter y hábito mental, ¿por qué presionar con él a una solterona tolerablemente curtida?

Además, aunque una vez pusiera su mano en la de Vernon en un baile, recordaba agudamente que la herida que su generosidad le había causado a su tierna sensibilidad había debilitado y deslustrado la refulgencia de dos o tres aniversarios sucesivos de su mayoría de edad. No se había repuesto tampoco del todo de la pasión codiciosa por el grupo completo de las más favorecidas del bello sexo, que en su temprana juventud le había hecho amargo someterse a la veleidad, por no decir a la inmodesta veleidad, de cualquier encantadora del grupo al darle su mano a un hombre y soportar que se fuera. Las damas de las que solo había oído hablar como damas de cierta belleza incurrieron en su ira por tener amantes o tomar maridos. Willoughby era de vasto alcance y no gritaba por rapacidad —pues sabía que ni siquiera bajo la ley islámica podía tenerlas a todas—, sino como custodio enamorado de la pureza del sexo, ante sonrojos tales como amantes y maridos, y era insoportable verla sacrificada a otros. ¿Qué son ellas sin su pureza? ¿Qué son las ciruelas del frutero? Invendibles. ¡Oh la pelusa sobre ellas!

—Como he dicho, pierdo mi mano derecha con Vernon —prosiguió Willoughby— y parece inevitable que lo pierda, salvo que nos esforcemos por retenerlo aquí. Creo, mi querida señorita Dale, que usted tiene mi carácter. Al menos, la recomendaré como mi futura biógrafa, con una reserva, por supuesto. Tendrá que subrayar el egoísmo. No puedo soportar perder a un miembro de mi casa, en ninguna circunstancia, y supone un esfuerzo un cambio de sentimiento hacia mí por parte de alguno de mis amigos a causa del matrimonio. Le pregunto a usted, ¿cómo puede ser bueno para Vernon abandonar un hogar tan agradable por la desgraciada profesión de la literatura? Desgraciadamente pagada, quiero decir —se inclinó ante la autora—. Que abandone la casa, si imagina que no armonizará con su joven dama. Es raro, aunque un buen camarada. Pero, en ese caso, debe tener donde establecerse. Mi plan para Vernon (los hombres, señorita Dale, no cambian sus viejos amigos cuando se casan), mi plan, que haría que la alteración en su sistema de vida apenas fuera perceptible, es construirle una poética casita de campo, lo suficientemente grande para una pareja, en los límites de mi parque. Los hombres, digo, no cambian. ¿Cómo es que no podemos decir lo mismo de las mujeres?

Leticia observó:

—La mujer genérica parece tener una extraordinaria facultad para tragarse a la individual.

—Respecto al individuo, a la persona en particular, puedo equivocarme. Precisamente porque pienso en el caso de ella, mi fuerte amistad inspira temor: indigno de ambos, sin duda, pero se remonta hasta la fuente. Incluso la amistad pura, esa es la mácula en nosotros, conoce algún tipo de celos; aunque me gustaría verla establecida, y cerca de mí, feliz, contribuyendo a mi felicidad con su incomparable encanto social. No la estimo genéricamente, desde luego.

—Si me hace el honor de referirse a mí, sir Willoughby —dijo Leticia—, vivo en la casa de mi padre.

—¿Qué pretendiente consideraría eso un rechazo? Solicitaría ser un tercero en la casa y compartir su afectuosa carga. Sinceramente, ¿por qué no? Y estoy arguyendo contra mi propia felicidad: ¡puede ser mi final!

—¿El final?

—Los viejos amigos son quisquillosos, exigentes. No, no el final. Sin embargo, si mi amigo no es el mismo para mí, es el final de esa forma de amistad: no hasta ese punto. Pero ¡cuando nos hemos acostumbrado a la forma! ¿Desdeñaría usted, en su aplicación a la amistad, la palabra *acostumbrado?* Somos criaturas de costumbres. Confieso que soy apocado en mis afectos; temo los cambios. ¡La sombra de una décima de pulgada en la elevación acostumbrada de una pestaña! Eso le dará una idea de mi susceptibilidad. Mi querida señorita Dale, me arrojo en brazos de su caridad, con toda mi debilidad al descubierto, déjeme añadir, como no podría hacer con nadie salvo con usted. ¡Tenga en cuenta, entonces, que la perdiera! El temor se debe enteramente a mi pusilanimidad. Las mujeres magnánimas pueden ser esposas, madres, y seguir reservando un hueco para la amistad. Pueden vencer, y lo harán, las más viles condiciones de la vida humana. Siempre he defendido que debemos pasar por nuestros estadios, nuestras diversas fases, y no hay desgracia en ello

mientras no impongan una tasa a lo quintaesencial, el elemento espiritual. ¿Me entiende? No soy un experto en esas elucidaciones abstractas.

—Se explica usted con claridad —dijo Leticia.

—Nunca he pretendido que la psicología fuera mi fuerte —dijo, sintiéndose abrumado por su frío elogio: no era menos susceptible a las divisiones fraccionales de los tonos que a las pestañas, siendo, por decirlo así, una melodía con la que todo desafinaba si no acordaba modesta o silenciosamente, y soportar esa melodía en persona es algo incomparablemente más exigente que la mejor de las piedras de toque o talismanes que se hayan inventado.

—¿Ha mejorado últimamente la salud de su padre?

—No se ha quejado de su salud cuando lo he visto esta mañana. Mi prima Amelia está con él y es una excelente enfermera.

—A su padre le gusta Vernon.

—Siente un gran respeto por el señor Whitford.

—¿Lo siente usted?

—¡Oh sí! Lo siento también.

—Con fundamento, eso es lo más seguro. Querría que mis amigos más queridos empezaran así. La pareja precipitada es... ¿Cómo podríamos describirla? Me temo que por su final. Las capacidades de Vernon han de respetarse. Su timidez es su enfermedad. Supongo que habrá reflexionado en que no era un capitalista. Podría haberse dirigido a mí; mi bolsa no está cerrada.

—No, sir Willoughby —dijo Leticia cálidamente, pues sus donativos a la caridad eran famosos.

Sus ojos le dieron el alimento que más le gustaba y, disfrutando con ellos, sir Willoughby prosiguió:

—Los ingresos de Vernon se regularían conmensurablemente con una nueva posición que requiere un aumento. ¡Dinero, dinero, dinero! Pero el mundo lo tendrá. Felizmente he heredado hábitos de negocio y economía personales. Vernon es un hombre que haría cincuenta veces más con una compañía que apreciara sus habilidades e iluminara sus pequeñas deficiencias. Son palpable, suficientemente pequeñas. Siempre ha sido consciente de mis deseos, cuando tal vez cumplirlos me llevara a dar otra vuelta al mundo, ¡aunque soy hombre de nido! ¿Cuándo comenzó nuestra amistad? En mi infancia, lo sé. Hace muchos años.

—Tengo treinta años —dijo Leticia.

Sorprendido y apenado por una calvicie que se parecía a los hechos de las damas (era conocido, por ausencia mental o manía, que habían desplazado la peluca) en la intimidad mortal que sacrificaba la admiración poética, sir Willoughby la castigó al estimar deliberadamente que no parecía tener menos.

—El genio —observó— no tiene nada que ver con las arrugas —uno de sus discursos favoritos; pero estaba herido y no podía recobrarse enseguida. Sobreviniéndole un estado de ánimo sentimental, la herida se agudizó. Podría haber calculado perfectamente la edad de la dama. Fue el jarro de agua fría de su descarada declaración sobre sus notas de flauta lo que lo conmovió.

Sir Willoughby miró el reloj dorado sobre la repisa de la chimenea y propuso un paseo por el césped antes de cenar.

Leticia recogió su labor de encaje.

—Por regla —dijo—, las autoras no son costureras.

—Dejaré la aguja o la pluma si me convierte en excepción —respondió.

Sir Willoughby intentó hacer un cumplido por su carácter excepcional. Como cuando el dedo del intérprete descansa distraídamente sobre el órgano, fue desmesurado y molesto a su propio oído. Sin embargo, ella había sido lo suficientemente buena como para reducir su aprensión de que el matrimonio de una mujer a sus treinta años con su primo Vernon sería una pérdida para él; por ello, mientras paseaban por el césped, mirando de reojo una y otra vez la ventana de la habitación donde su Clara y Vernon celebraban consejo, los planes que se había consentido para su comodidad prospectiva y sus sensaciones del momento se mantenían en una armonía como la que oímos cuando los músicos de una orquesta afinan sus instrumentos. No es perfecta, pero promete serlo pronto. No somos ángeles, que siempre tienen su salterio en el tono coral. Somos mortales y logramos el acorde celestial con esfuerzo, a través de la pena. Cierta pena era necesaria para sir Willoughby; de otro modo no habría visto contrariada su generosidad. En consecuencia, se sintió tiernamente atraído de nuevo hacia Leticia hasta el punto de decirse a sí mismo: «Sería una esposa inestimable con la que conversar». Era la esposa inestimable que ofrecía a su primo.

En apariencia, considerando la duración de la conferencia de su Clara y Vernon, su primo requería una firme persuasión para aceptar el ofrecimiento.

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30 Uno por uno es un emblema del matrimonio.

XV

La petición de una liberación

Ni Clara ni Vernon se presentaron a la mesa a mediodía. Middleton habló con la señorita Dale de materias clásicas, como un gigante afable ayudando a saltar de una piedra a otra a un niño en un arroyo de montaña, de manera que una audiencia sin cultivar podría suponer, al verla en dificultades, que Leticia había hecho algo por sí misma. Sir Willoughby estaba orgulloso de ella y ansioso, por tanto, de resolver sus asuntos mientras aún temía perderla. Esperaba darlo por terminado dirigiéndole una o dos palabras a Vernon antes de cenar. La petición de Clara de ser libre, de liberarse de *él,* le había preocupado vagamente incluso más de lo que había ofendido su orgullo.

La señorita Isabel salió de la estancia.

Volvió y dijo:

—Han declinado comer.

—Entonces podemos levantarnos —señaló sir Willoughby.

—Estaba llorando —le susurró.

—Propio de chiquillas —dijo él.

Las dos damas mayores salieron juntas. La señorita Dale, prosiguiendo su tema con el reverendo doctor, fue invitada a una conversación en la biblioteca. Sir Willoughby caminó arriba y abajo por el césped, mirando de reojo la sala oeste conforme giraba la pierna. Impacientándose, miró por la ventana y encontró vacía la estancia.

Durante la tarde no se supo nada de Clara ni de Vernon. Hacia la hora de cenar, la doncella de la señorita Middleton informó a las señoras que su ama estaba en cama, indispuesta por un dolor de cabeza para estar presente. El joven Crossjay trajo un mensaje de Vernon (con retraso debido a unos huevos de aves) que decía que había salido a las colinas y pensaba cenar con el doctor Corney.

Sir Willoughby envió sus condolencias a su prometida. No se sentía capaz de emplearse en su tema acostumbrado, siendo, como la copa de una campana, un hombre de un tañido tan persistente consigo mismo respecto a sí mismo que el recuerdo de una palabra dudosa o una circunstancia desagradable le afectaba profundamente y alteraba su paz interior; como las cosas dudosas y desagradables suelen ocurrir, sentía una gran necesidad de una adoradora y se veía obligado con frecuencia a apelar a ella para que le mostrara señales de una idolatría que sirviera como antídoto. En este caso, en que sentía de una manera acuciante la necesidad de una adoradora, no obtuvo muestras en absoluto. El reverendo doctor había fascinado a la señorita Dale, así que sir Willoughby carecía de todo consuelo. Sus temas en público eran los de un caballero inglés: caballos, perros, caza, deporte, intriga, escándalo, política, vinos, los temas masculinos, condescendiente con el chismorreo de las damas y tolerante con alguna anécdota subida de tono. ¿Qué interés podía tener por el teatro ateniense y la muchacha cuya flauta sonaba detrás de la escena, imitando al ruiseñor y cautivando a un público griego? Habría sospechado una intención en la firme atención de la señorita Dale si hubiera podido concebirla. Además, los antiguos no eran decorosos; no escribían, como nosotros, los modernos, para señoras. Se atrevió a interrumpir en la cena al doctor Middleton en una ocasión:

—La señorita Dale hará bien, creo, en limitarse a su edición de los clásicos.

—Esa —respondió el doctor Middleton— es la observación de un estudiante del diccionario de mitología clásica en inglés.

—El teatro es una cuestión de clima, señor. Me lo concederá.

—Si el ingenio proviene del clima, será como usted dice, señor.

—Entre nosotros parece una cuestión de dolorosa crianza o de su necesidad —dijo la señorita Dale, preguntando al doctor Middleton y excluyendo a sir Willoughby, como si hubiera sido una turbación momentánea en la corriente de su diálogo.

Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel, hasta ese momento oyentes excelentes de la docta charla, vieron la necesidad de acudir en su rescate, pero no podemos conversar en la mesa con nuestras tías, que viven en casa, de temas generales; el intento aumentó su disgusto; consideró que había escogido mal a su padre político, que los eruditos son una raza sin refinar; que las mujeres jóvenes y las jovencitas son devotas de cualquier forma de poder y un erudito las absorberá por ser una variación, hasta concluir que debía tener una ronda de amigos para cenar, especialmente de señoras, que lo apreciaran, durante la visita del doctor. El dolor de cabeza de Clara, arriba, y la falta de modales del doctor Middleton, abajo, afectó a sus instintos de un modo

que le hizo darse cuenta de que un golpe de desgracia era inminente; el trueno flotaba en el aire. Sin embargo, aprendió algo que le sería de provecho. El tema del vino apartó al doctor de sus clásicos; era mágico con él. Huésped y anfitrión descubrieron una fuerte fraternidad de gusto en sus sentimientos respecto a vinos y cosechas; se estimularon el uno al otro nombrando grandes añadas de uva y, si sir Willoughby tuvo que sacrificar a las damas por el tema, lamentó la circunstancia que lo obligó a pecar contra sus hábitos para mantenerse en la conversación y poner de relieve la debilidad del anciano caballero.

Avanzada la noche oyó la campana de la casa y, encontrándose a Vernon en el vestíbulo, lo invitó a entrar en el laboratorio para que le contara lo último del doctor Corney. Vernon fue breve; Corney no había soltado una sola anécdota, dijo, y encendió su palmatoria.

—A propósito, Vernon, ¿has hablado con la señorita Middleton?

—Ella hablará contigo mañana a las doce.

—¿Mañana a las doce?

—Eso le da veinticuatro horas.

Sir Willoughby decidió que debía verse su perplejidad. Pero Vernon le dio las buenas noches y subió las escaleras antes de que la dramática exhibición de sorpresa diera que hablar.

El trueno flotaba en el aire y el golpe estaba a punto. Los instintos de sir Willoughby se despertaron con las muchas señales y, aunque acallados, eran perceptibles al insistir en los excesos frenéticos a los que las mujeres son propensas por la pasión de los celos. Creía en los celos de Clara porque realmente se había propuesto suscitarlos, en forma de emulación, débilmente. No podía suponer que le hubiera hablado de ello a Vernon. Era poco creíble la seriedad de su deseo de ser liberada de su compromiso. Sin embargo, fijar una hora para que le hablara tras un intervalo de veinticuatro horas dejaba abierta una puerta a lo increíble y añadía su peso a la masa de sospechas. ¿Quién habría imaginado a Clara Middleton una víctima tan salvaje de esa pasión intemperada? Se musitó a sí mismo algunas observaciones atenuantes para excusar a una joven semidemente y las rechazó en conjunto por su absurda falta de aplicación a Clara. Para conciliar el sueño consintió en culparse ligeramente a sí mismo, al estilo del historiador enamorado de las bellezas equívocas que alude a sus pecadillos. Lo había hecho para ser edificante con ella. El sueño, sin embargo, le falló. Que unos celos desordenados pelearan con un amor todopoderoso resolvió su problema hasta que trató de adecuar la proposición con el carácter de Clara. No había descubierto en ella ningún rasgo sureño. Últimamente, con el día radiante en perspectiva, Clara se había contraído y enfriado. No había interpretación suya ni del misterio.

Por la mañana, en el desayuno, la confesión de falta de sueño fue general. Salvo la señorita Dale y el doctor Middleton, nadie había conciliado el sueño.

—Yo, señor —respondió el doctor a sir Willoughby— he dormido como un léxico en su biblioteca cuando el señor Whitford y yo no estamos allí.

Vernon mencionó circunstancialmente que había estado escribiendo toda la noche.

—Acabaréis matándoos —le reprochó sir Willoughby—. Por mi parte, sigo el principio de cumplir con mi trabajo sin necesidad de matarme.

Clara vigilaba cualquier síntoma de ridículo en su padre. Miró mansamente al trabajador sistemático. Era incapaz de adivinar si tendría en él a un aliado o a un juez. Lo último, temía. Ahora que había entrado en liza, vio la división de la línea en la que se encontraba de aquella en la que el mundo pone a las muchachas que se han prometido: su padre no podría ponerse de su lado; iba demasiado lejos. La amaba, pero consideraría que obraba por un capricho enloquecido; no trataría de entender su caso. El disgusto del erudito por un desarreglo de los asuntos humanos que por milagro discurrían suavemente lo pondría por sí mismo en su contra y, con el mundo respaldando la visión que tenía de ella, podría comportarse como un padre despótico. ¿Cómo podría defenderse ante él? Al pensar en sir Willoughby, su lengua estaba dispuesta y la astucia femenina alerta para irrumpir, pero al pensar en su padre solo podía imaginarse oponiendo torpeza y obstinación.

—No es exactamente la misma clase de trabajo —dijo.

El doctor Middleton la miró arqueando las cejas, pensando en su propia noción de trabajo del baronet.

Hacía falta tan poco para azuzarla que se recreó en la mirada, convenciendo a los ojos de su padre para que se quedaran con ella mientras pudieran y empezando a pensar que podría ganarlo para su causa, aunque confesara que se había equivocado más de lo que pensaba; por él, esto es, su error no alteraría su paz.

—No digo que sea el mismo —observó sir Willoughby, solicitando una alianza con su opinión—. Mi pobre trabajo es para el día y el de Vernon, sin duda, para el mañana. Defiendo, sin embargo, conservar la salud como el principal instrumento del trabajo.

—Del trabajo continuo: estoy de acuerdo con usted en eso —dijo cordialmente el doctor Middleton.

El corazón de Clara se hundió; hacía falta muy poco para mortificarla.

Acusémosla de un antagonismo arrogante hacia su prometido, pero recordemos que, aunque no había

pronunciado palabra que diera una buena razón de ello, la naturaleza interpreta la naturaleza; los cautivos pueden ser despojados de todo salvo del poder de interpretar a su tirano; recordemos también que, como ella misma sabía, no estaba libre de culpa; sentía en parte hacia sí misma la rabia que sentía hacia él.

Al levantarse de la mesa se quedó con sir Willoughby. Salió después de la señorita Dale y exclamó:

—¿El laboratorio? ¿Me aceptará por compañera de paseo cuando vaya a ver a su padre? Se respira tierra y cielo hoy al aire libre. ¿No es un día de verano con brisa de primavera? Daré una vuelta por su jardín y no la apremiaré en su visita, se lo prometo.

—Me hará muy feliz. Pero salgo enseguida —dijo Leticia al ver a sir Willoughby acechando para quitarle de las manos a su prometida.

—Sí, un sombrero y estoy dispuesta.

—La esperaré en la terraza.

—No tendrá que esperar.

—Cinco minutos a lo sumo —le dijo sir Willoughby a Leticia, que pasó entre ambos dejándolos solos.

—Bien, amor mío —dijo dirigiéndose a su prometida casi con un abrazo—, ¿cuál es la historia? ¿Cómo te fue con el viejo Vernon ayer? ¿Quiere y no quiere? Es una mujer en estos asuntos. No puedo perdonarle que te causara dolor de cabeza. Te vieron llorando.

—Sí, lloré —dijo Clara.

—Cuéntamelo todo. Ya sabes, mi querida niña, si lo hace o no, mantenerlo de alguna manera en la vecindad, tal vez no en casa, ese es el punto. No es necesario en estos días instar al matrimonio. Estoy seguro de que el campo está pendiente... La mayoría de matrimonios habría de celebrarse con la campana de duelo.

—Lo creo así —dijo Clara.

—Solo los matrimonios auténticos han de saludarse con alegres repiqueteos.

—No digas esas cosas en público, Willoughby.

—¡Solo a ti, a ti! No creas que vaya a exponerme al mundo. Bueno, sondeé a la señorita Dale y no habrá un obstáculo violento. ¿Qué hay de Vernon?

—Hablaré contigo, Willoughby, cuando vuelva de mi paseo con la señorita Dale, antes de las doce.

—¡Las doce! —dijo.

—He fijado una hora. Parecerá infantil. Puedo explicarlo. Pero está fijada, no puedo negarlo, tal vez porque seré algo infantil y me he prescrito retrasar lo que quiero hablar un espacio de tiempo. Puedo decirte ahora que no he persuadido al señor Vernon y que la ruptura de nuestro compromiso no lo induciría a quedarse.

—¿Vernon usó esas palabras?

—Lo hice yo.

—¿La ruptura de nuestro compromiso? Vamos al laboratorio, amor mío.

—No tengo tiempo.

—¡El tiempo se detendrá antes de interferir en nuestra conversación! ¡La ruptura...! Es un sacrilegio hablar de eso.

—Eso es lo que siento, pero hay que hablar de ello.

—¿A veces? ¿Por qué? No puedo ni imaginar la ocasión. Ya sabes, Clara, que para mí el empeño de la confianza, el compromiso de dos enamorados, es un asunto religioso. Lo considero tan sagrado como el matrimonio; para mí es incluso más sagrado; no puedo decirte hasta qué punto; solo puedo apelar a que me entiendas en el fondo de tu corazón. Leemos noticias de divorcios con una indiferencia relativa. Tienen lugar entre parejas que han borrado todo romance.

Clara podría haberle preguntado a su vez con su irónica frialdad, al oírlo desafiarla tan ciegamente, si el romance podía ser para él un asunto religioso.

Willoughby propició los sentimientos menos belicosos en ella al exclamar:

—¡Pobres almas! Dejémoslas separarse. La gente casada que ya no se ama pertenece a la categoría de lo innombrable. Pero ¡insinuar la ruptura de un compromiso —de nuestro compromiso— entre *nosotros!* ¡Oh!

—¡Oh! —Clara respondió con una nota de cisne que aumentó la mecánica imitación de la suya hasta lo ilimitadamente doloroso—. ¡Oh! —musitó—. Debe ser ahora. No hables hasta que me hayas oído. Tal vez no tenga la cabeza clara. Y dos escenas... Dos sería más de lo que puedo soportar. Me apena mucho el daño que te he hecho. Lo siento por ti. Toda la culpa es mía. Willoughby, debes liberarme. No me hagas oír una palabra de esa palabra; no conozco los celos... ¡Seré feliz si puedo llamarte amigo y verte con una mujer más digna que yo, que pueda llamarme amiga! Tienes mi voto... que te di sin conocer mis sentimientos. Reprueba la ignorancia de una muchacha débil y alocada. Lo he pensado y no veo maldad, aunque la culpa sea grande, vergonzosa. Tú no tienes ninguna culpa. No sufrirás como yo. ¿Serás generoso conmigo? No siento respeto por mí misma al pedirte que seas generoso y me liberes.

—Pero ¿ese fue... —Willoughby mantuvo la calma—, ese fue, entonces, el tema de tu entrevista con Vernon?

—Hablé con él. Hice mi parte y hablé con él.

—¿De mí?

—De mí misma. Veo que te duele; no podía evitarlo. Sí, de ti, en la medida en que estábamos relacionados. Dije que creía que me liberarías. Dije que podía ser fiel a mi palabra, pero que tú no insistirías. ¿Puede insistir un caballero? Pero ni un paso más; amor no; no tengo. Willoughby, trátame como a alguien perfectamente indigno. Lo soy. Tendría que haberlo sabido hace un año. Me engañé a mí misma. Debió de ser por amor.

—¡Debió de ser! —el tono de Willoughby fue un áspero comentario.

—Encuentro que no tengo amor. Creo que soy contraria a él. No he experimentado lo que la gente dice de él. Creo que estaba equivocada. Es fácil decirlo, pero muy doloroso. Entiende que mi plegaria es por la libertad, por no estar atada. Si puedes liberarme y perdonarme, o prometer que me perdonarás al final, o dices una palabra amable, sé que es porque estoy tan por debajo de ti que he sido incapaz de darte el amor que deberías obtener de una esposa. Dime solo que me vaya. Eres tú el que rompe el compromiso al descubrir mi falta de corazón. Lo que la gente piense me importa poco. Mi ansiedad será la de ahorrarte disgustos.

Esperó: Willoughby parecía estar a punto de hablar.

Él se dio cuenta de su expectación; no tenía dentro de sí más que un tumulto estrafalario y su dignidad le aconsejó decepcionarla.

Oscilando la cabeza, como la palmera oriental cuya sombra es una bendición para el fervoroso peregrino que está debajo, sonriendo con gravedad, le preguntó indirectamente a su dignidad qué podía decir para mantenerla y darle a esa joven alocada una reprimenda amargamente compasiva. Lo que hubiera que pensar seguía siendo algo más remoto. Lo que hacer lo golpeó primero.

Le cogió con fuerza las manos a Clara, abrió la puerta de par en par y dijo sin dejar de parpadear:

—En el laboratorio no nos interrumpirán. No sabía de dónde vendría el efecto más desagradable sobre los sentidos. Siempre hay alguien *husmeando* . Quiero decir, lo que queda del desayuno. Tal vez los haya satirizado con demasiada elegancia... si conoces las letras. Si no están *calculando* . ¡Más ofensivo que los restos de un banquete nocturno! Un viaje por América es instructivo, aunque no tan romántico. No tan romántico como Italia, quiero decir. Escapémonos.

Ella se soltó de su brazo. Estaba aturdida, era lamentable, pero estaba en medio del torrente y no podía soportar una pausa ni un cambio de lugar.

—Debe ser aquí, un minuto más; no puedo ir a otra parte para volver a empezar. Háblame aquí, contesta a mi petición. Una palabra. Si me perdonas, será sobrehumano. Pero libérame.

—En serio —repuso él—, ¡tazas de té y tazas de café, migajas, cáscaras de huevo, caviar, mantequilla, carne, tocino! ¿Podemos? La estancia apesta.

—Entonces me iré a pasear con la señorita Dale. ¿Hablarás conmigo a mi vuelta?

—En cualquier momento. Ve con la señorita Dale. Pero ¡querida! ¡Amor mío! En serio, ¿dónde estamos? He oído hablar de riñas de enamorados. Pero yo no riño. Es una de mis características. ¡Le hablas de mí a mi primo Vernon! En serio, la fe empeñada significa fe empeñada, igual que un cable de hierro es un cable para sujetar algo. ¿Una vacilación? ¡A Vernon, entre todos los hombres! ¡Calla! Ella ha estado soñando con un héroe perfecto y la comparación es desfavorable para su Willoughby. Pero, Clara mía, ¡cuando te digo que una prometida es una prometida y que tú eres mía, mía!

—Willoughby, lo has mencionado... Las separaciones de los casados. Lo has dicho, si no se aman... ¡Oh! Di, ¿no es mejor... mejor que después?

Willoughby se aprovechó de su modestia al hablar y exclamó:

—¿Dónde estamos? Una prometida es una prometida y una esposa es una esposa y una *novia* está, por honor, *casada* . No puedes ser liberada. Estamos unidos. Reconócelo: unidos. ¡No es posible liberar a una esposa!

—¿Y si se fuga...?

Eso fue demasiado directo para ser entendido de una manera histriónica. La había llevado al extremo de imaginar de la manera más clara la circunstancia que había mencionado y con esa perspectiva aclarada la desesperada criatura se gloriaba en echar el cerrojo a la insensibilidad real o asumida del hombre que debía, con los escalofríos, despertarse.

Pero enseguida Clara se repuso, con la mirada empañada. Vio su horror y vio que era compartido, compartido solo al ser visto, lo que la llevó a regocijarse con la más profunda de las vistas con la vergüenza que quedaba en ella.

—¿Fugarse? ¿Fugarse? ¿Fugarse? —dijo tan rápidamente como parpadeaba—. ¿Cómo? ¿Dónde? ¿Qué

idea...?

Estaba a punto de un estallido que habría hundido su concepción de la pureza de los jóvenes miembros del sexo de una manera conmovedora.

¡Que ella, una joven, doncella, de estricta educación, supiera, sin que él se lo hubiera enseñado, que las esposas se fugan! ¡Que supiera que fugándose obligaban a sus maridos a abandonar la persecución, a renunciar a la posesión! ¡Que lo hubiera sugerido de sí misma como esposa! ¡Que hablara de fugarse!

Su ideal, el ideal del Egoísta corriente de un sexo de cera, se habría hecho añicos si Clara hubiera seguido hablando para colmar el esbozo de esas interjecciones.

Clara estuvo tentada, pues durante los últimos minutos el ardor de su situación había iluminado su entendimiento sobre un aspecto tan ajeno a ella como los campos de hielo del norte un poco antes, y la perspectiva que se le ofreció a su valor de ver más allá de la vergüenza y que pareciera que estaba como en casa al hacer el mal la asqueó y atemorizó. Se contuvo, sobre todo tras el primer freno de la timidez masculina, porque no podía soportar rebajar la idea de su sexo ni siquiera en la estima de Willoughby.

La puerta estaba abierta. Pensó en salir a respirar en un intervalo de tregua.

Reflexionó rápidamente y con recelo sobre su situación: «Si hemos de pasar por esto para deshacer un compromiso, ¿qué será para las pobres mujeres librarse de un matrimonio?»

Si lo hubiera dicho, sir Willoughby podría haberse dado cuenta de que ella no era tan perversamente sabia en las cosas de este mundo como el mero instinto de su sexo, que la intemperancia de una criatura que lucha por romper sus cadenas había suscitado, había hecho que pareciera en su carrera por empuñar un arma que, además, él le había señalado.

Clara retomó la vieja promesa rota de las mujeres para prometer de nuevo: «¡No le daré mi mano a ningún hombre!»

Le contestó a sir Willoughby:

—Lo he dicho todo. No puedo explicar lo que he dicho.

Había oído unos pasos en el corredor. Vernon entró.

Al advertirlos, enunció su misión con una disculpa:

—El doctor Middleton se ha dejado un libro en esta habitación. Ya lo veo, es de Heinsius.

—¡Ja! Por supuesto, un libro; los libros no deberían dejarse aquí si no se han traído aquí, con mis respetos para el doctor Middleton, que puede hacer lo que le plazca, aunque, en serio, el orden es el orden —dijo sir Willoughby—. Vamos al laboratorio, Clara. Es un comentario sobre los seres humanos que dondequiera que estén habrá un revoltijo y quienes los admiráis —dividió un pálido asentimiento entre Vernon y la rancia mesa del desayuno— habéis de hacer lo que podáis al respecto. Vamos, Clara.

Clara repuso que se había comprometido a pasear con la señorita Dale.

—La señorita Dale espera en el vestíbulo —dijo Vernon.

—La señorita Dale espera —dijo Clara.

—Pasear con la señorita Dale, pasear con la señorita Dale —insistió sir Willoughby—. Le pediré que espere otros dos minutos. La encontraréis en el vestíbulo cuando salgáis.

Hizo sonar la campana y salió.

—Confíe en la señorita Dale. Es digna de ello —le dijo Vernon a Clara.

—No he avanzado un paso —respondió ella.

—Recuerde que está en una situación que usted ha elegido y que si, tras pensar en ello, trata de fugarse, tendrá que decidirse a dar la batalla y no rendirse aunque la derroten en todas; es la única oportunidad que tiene.

—No la elegí yo, no diga que la elegí, señor Whitford. No la elegí. Fui incapaz de elegir realmente. Consentí.

—De hecho es lo mismo. Pero ha de estar segura de lo que desea.

—Sí —asintió, aceptando como justo castigo que se supusiera que no sabía lo que deseaba—. Su consejo me ha ayudado hoy.

—¿La aconsejé?

—¿Lamenta dar consejos?

—Desde luego lamentaría una palabra que se entrometiera entre usted y él.

—Pero ¿no se irá de la casa aún? ¿No me dejará sin un amigo? Si papá y yo nos marchamos mañana, preveo una correspondencia infinita. He de quedarme al menos unos días y sobrellevarlo y luego, cuando tenga que contárselo a mi pobre padre, imagínese el efecto.

Sir Willoughby entró de repente para corregir el error de su partida.

—La señorita Dale te espera, querida mía. ¿Llevas un bonete, un sombrero? ¿No? ¿Has olvidado que habías quedado en pasear con ella?

—Estoy lista —dijo Clara, y salió.

Los dos caballeros, detrás de ella, se separaron en el corredor. No se hablaron.

Clara había oído el reproche que se les hace a las mujeres de que rompen las amistades de los hombres. Se lo reprochó a sí misma, pero estaba en marcha, forzada por la necesidad, entre la roca y el mar. ¡Era terrible pensarlo! Era una de las criaturas de las que se habla.

XVI

Clara y Leticia

A pesar de su honorable reserva, Vernon había dicho cosas que habían hecho que la señorita Middleton estuviera más firmemente decidida de lo que había estado en la escena con sir Willoughby. Su observación sobre las batallas y la derrota en todas ellas había hecho que sus sentimientos anteriores parecieran flojos en comparación con la energía de combate que ahora la animaba y podía declarar con vehemencia que no había elegido; era demasiado joven, demasiado ignorante para elegir. Vernon había usado erróneamente esa palabra; sonaba maliciosa y llamar consentir a lo mismo que elegir era obstinadamente injusto. El señor Whitford tenía buenas intenciones; era escrupuloso, muy escrupuloso, pero no era el héroe venido del cielo con una espada brillante para romper las cadenas de una mujer y librarla de las fauces del abismo [31] .

La lógica frialdad de su protesta cuando Clara puso a un lado la estúpida misión que sir Willoughby le había confiado y lloró para sí careció de heroísmo en la misma proporción en que fue digna de alabanza. Vernon dejó que ella hiciese cuanto deseaba, estipulando simplemente que debía haber una pausa de veinticuatro horas para que lo pensase antes de pasar a tratar de librarse. No hubo una palabra de consuelo. Vernon dijo: «Soy el último hombre para dar consejo en este caso». Pero ella lo había asombrado con su confesión. Le salió, sin saber cómo. La guió que Vernon declinara la idea del matrimonio y que ella lo felicitara por estar exento de la perspectiva del yugo, pero la memoria era demasiado torpe para revivir el exaltado minuto o los dos minutos de lenguaje roto en los que ella fue culpable de su extrema conducta.

Este caballero no era un adulador, apenas un amigo. Podía contemplar su pena sin mitigarla. ¿Suponía que la había mitigado cálidamente? Todos sus sentimientos se agolparon en su seno para lanzarlos en reprobación de Vernon al pensarlo. Sin embargo, lo condenó por su excesiva frialdad, su transparente ansiedad por no comprometerse con una sola sílaba, su aire de decir: «Lo suponía, pero ¿por qué me expone a mí el caso?». Su recomendación de que estuviera segura de que sabía lo que quería era algo insultante. Lo exoneró de la intención; la había tratado como a una niña. Por lo que había dicho de la señorita Dale, proponía que imitara a esa dama.

«Debo ser yo misma o estaré cavando hipócritamente mi tumba», se dijo Clara, mientras pedía consejo a Leticia sobre la ruta que seguir y admirando la favorecedora ondulación del sombrero de su compañera.

Sir Willoughby, con muchas muestras de pesar por las cartas de trabajo que le impedían el placer de acompañarlas, observó sobre el sendero que había propuesto la señorita Dale:

—En ese caso necesitarán un sirviente.

—Entonces cogeremos el otro —dijo Clara, y se pusieron en marcha.

—Sir Willoughby —le dijo la señorita Dale— está siempre alarmado por su falta de protección.

Clara miró las nubes y cerró su parasol. Contestó:

—Inspira timidez.

Había algo en el tono y el carácter de la respuesta que alertó a Leticia de que la esperaba lo contrario de una tranquila charla con la señorita Middleton.

—¿Le gusta caminar? —escogió un tema apacible.

—Caminar o cabalgar; sí, caminar —dijo Clara—. La dificultad estriba en encontrar compañía.

—Perderemos al señor Whitford la semana que viene.

—¿Se va?

—Será una gran pérdida para mí, pues yo no cabalgo —repuso Leticia a la pregunta improvisada.

—¡Ah!

La señorita Middleton no alentó la conversación cuando se limitó a exhalar su voz.

Leticia probó otro tema neutral.

—El tiempo es apropiado para nuestro país —dijo.

—¿Inglaterra o Patterne Park? Me gustan tanto las montañas que no tengo entusiasmo por la llanura.

—¿Considera llano nuestro país, señorita Middleton? Tenemos ondulaciones, colinas y suficiente diversidad: prados, ríos, arboledas, arroyos y buenos caminos y hermosos senderos.

—La belleza es abrumadora. Es hermoso verla, pero para vivir creo que prefiero la fealdad. Puedo imaginar aprender a amar la fealdad. Es sincera. No puede engañarnos por jóvenes que seamos. Estos parques de la gente rica son una parte de la hermosura. Prefiero los campos, los pastos comunales.

—Los parques nos dan deliciosos paseos verdes, senderos que atraviesan hermosos bosques.

—Si hay un derecho de paso para el público.

—Debe haberlo —dijo Leticia Dale, asombrándose, y Clara exclamó:

—¡Me irrita la restricción; setos y empalizadas por todas partes! Tendría que viajar diez años para sentarme a gusto entre estas fortificaciones. Por supuesto puedo leer con placer la poesía de esta rica clase de campo inglés. Pero parece que requiera de mí la poesía. ¿Qué diría usted de los seres humanos que la requieren?

—Que no son tan sociables salvo que la bruma de la distancia mejore la vista.

—Entonces ¡usted sabe que es más sabia!

Leticia alzó sus oscuras pestañas; quería entender. Solo podía imaginar que lo hacía y, si era así, eso significaba que la señorita Middleton la consideraba sabia por seguir soltera.

Clara tenía la oscura preconcepción de que le habían insinuado sus «celos» a la señorita Dale.

—¿Conoció a la señorita Durham? —dijo.

—No de un modo íntimo.

—¿Tanto como a mí?

—No tanto.

—Pero la vio más.

—Era más reservada conmigo.

—¡Oh señorita Dale, yo no me mostraría reservada con usted!

El temblor de su voz obligó a Leticia a robarle una mirada. A Clara le brillaban los ojos y parecía dispuesta a la veleidad de los golpeados por la fiebre; de otro modo no habría delatado su excitación.

—Usted no permitirá que ninguno de estos nobles árboles sea derribado, señorita Middleton.

—El hacha es mejor que la decadencia, ¿no cree?

—Creo que su influencia será grande y la usará siempre para bien.

—¿Mi influencia, señorita Dale? He pedido esta mañana un favor y no se me ha concedido.

Lo dijo a la ligera, pero el rostro de Clara era más significativo y un «¿Qué?» se escapó de los labios de Leticia.

Antes de que pudiera excusarse, Clara había respondido:

—Mi libertad.

Con otro tono, más elevado, Leticia dijo: «¿Qué?», y contempló de arriba abajo a su compañera; parecía dudar y al mismo tiempo, lenta y dolorosamente, estar convencida. Clara vio cómo el vacío de su expresión se fue llenando de tristeza.

—Le he pedido que me libere de mi compromiso, señorita Dale.

—¿A sir Willoughby?

—Le resulta increíble, ¿verdad? Ha rehusado. Ya ve que no tengo influencia.

—Señorita Middleton, es terrible.

—¿Ser arrastrada al matrimonio contra nuestra voluntad? Sí.

—¡Oh señorita Middleton!

—¿No lo cree así?

—No puede ser eso lo que se proponga.

—¿No pensará de mí que soy veleidosa? Usted sabe que no lo soy. Es tan serio como un ratón en una trampa.

—¡No, no me malinterprete! Señorita Middleton, un golpe así para sir Willoughby será tremendo, extremadamente cruel. La adora a usted.

—Adoraba a la señorita Durham.

—No de una manera tan profunda; era distinto.

—¿No hubo cortejo entonces? Ahora también; no tanto: no es tan joven. Pero mi razón para hablar de la señorita Durham era expresar la extrañeza por una muchacha que gana su libertad precipitándose en una boda. ¿Es comprensible para usted? Pasa de una prisión a otra. Esas son las acciones de nuestra conducta que sorprenden a los hombres y les obligan a ridiculizarnos y, me atrevería a decir, a despreciarnos.

—Pero, señorita Middleton, que sir Willoughby conceda esa petición, si ha sido así...

—Ha sido así, y la he hecho yo, y la volveré a hacer. Lo he atribuido todo a mi falta de dignidad, señorita Dale. Así el condado pensará en mí y con razón. Prefiero defenderlo a él que a mí misma. Requiere una esposa distinta de cualquier cosa que yo pueda ser. Eso es lo que he descubierto, por desgracia tarde. La culpa es toda mía. El mundo no puede ser demasiado severo conmigo. Pero debo ser libre si he de ser justa en mis juicios incluso sobre el caballero al que he perjudicado.

—Un caballero tan noble —suspiró Leticia.

—Suscribiré cualquier elogio suyo —dijo Clara, con un pensamiento penetrante sobre la posibilidad de que una dama experimentada en él como Leticia lo considerase noble—. Tiene un noble aire. Digo sincera-

mente que su apreciación demuestra su nobleza.

La sensación de Clara de oponerse a sir Willoughby la impulsó a ese estado salvaje, que dejó gravemente perpleja a Leticia.

—Y es —añadió Clara— una devastadora reprimenda para mí; lo conozco menos; no he tenido una larga experiencia de él.

Leticia sospesó la oscuridad de esas palabras que habrían delatado su roma inteligencia salvo por un destello que arrojó sobre otra comunicación más oscura. Temió que fueran celos, por extraño que pareciera, una sombra de celos que había afectado a la señorita Middleton, como sir Willoughby había insinuado vagamente cuando esperaban en el vestíbulo. «Una dolencia algo femenina, una falta de comprensión de una perfecta amistad»: esas habían sido sus palabras y había sugerido vagamente que había que tener cuidado al elogiar a su amigo.

Decidió ser explícita.

—No he dicho que crea que está más allá de la crítica, señorita Middleton.

—¿Noble?

—Tiene defectos. Cuando conocemos a una persona durante años los defectos salen a la luz, pero la costumbre los suaviza, y supongo que nos sentimos adulados al ver aquello a lo que resulta difícil estar ciego. ¡Nos halaga un poco! ¿No admira usted esa perspectiva? Es mi favorita.

Clara contempló la riqueza del follaje, el bosque y el agua, la aguja de la iglesia, una ciudad y las colinas del horizonte. Una alondra cantaba.

—Ni siquiera el ave que no se marcha —dijo, queriendo decir que no tenía corazón para el ave que se contenta con ascender y descender en ese lugar.

Leticia pasó a otra noción, oscura e inmensa, del disgusto febril de la señorita Middleton. Se encogió con ella en una especie de temor a que fuera contagiosa y le arrebatara la posesión renovada cada vez del paisaje familiar, pero Clara la detuvo al decir:

—Por usted podría amar este paisaje... a su tiempo, o alguna querida y vieja escena inglesa. Desde... desde este cambio en mi... no puedo separar el paisaje de las asociaciones. Ahora sé que la juventud pasa. He envejecido años en una semana. Señorita Dale, si me diera mi libertad, si me pidiera que me fuera, si se quedara solo...

—Lo compadecería.

—¡A él, no a mí! ¡Oh! Está bien. Espero que lo hiciera, sé que lo haría.

El intento de Leticia de cambiar el tema de la señorita Middleton fue vano, pues ahora parecía atender realmente al lenguaje de los celos —¡celos de la vieja Letty Dale!— al que antes era ajeno.

—Sí —dijo—, pero usted me hace escuchar en la oscuridad y, cuando lo hago, tengo el hábito de arrojar como guía la luz que encuentro en mi interior. Usted me conoce, si quiere, tanto como yo me conozco a mí misma. No crea que me alejo demasiado del asunto cuando le digo que mi salud es débil. Soy lo que los médicos llaman anémica, una criatura sin sangre. La sangre es vida, así que no tengo demasiada vida. Hace diez años, once, para ser precisos, ¡pensaba en conquistar el mundo con la pluma! El resultado es que me reconforta estar junto al fuego sin estar segura de tenerlo y ese es mi logro. Mis días son monótonos, pero temo que haya en ellos una alteración. Mi padre tiene muy poco dinero. Subsistimos de los ingresos particulares que tiene y de su pensión; fue médico del ejército. De vez en cuando he de vivir en la ciudad para tener pupilos. Le estaría agradecida a cualquiera que me salvara de todo eso. Me sorprendería que me escogiera para encargarme de su casa. ¿Le he explicado la naturaleza de mi compasión? Sería la compasión de la simpatía corriente, la linfa pura de la compasión, todo lo desencarnada que pudiera darse. La última muda del año en el árbol no forma una guirnalda atractiva. Su mérito es que carece de ambición. Yo soy igual. Señorita Middleton, ya no puedo decirle nada más de mí misma. Espero que vea mi sinceridad.

—La veo —dijo Clara.

Con el segundo latido de su corazón dijo:

—¡La veo y envidio su humildad! ¡Estaría orgullosa si pudiera imitarla! ¡Oh qué orgullosa estaría si pudiera hablar con esa sinceridad! No se ha dirigido a mí sin algo de los buenos sentimientos de los que están hechos los amigos. Estoy segura de eso. Para ser tan sincero con otra persona ha de haber una afinidad. Así lo juzgo. ¿Presumo demasiado?

En el rostro de Leticia asomó la amabilidad.

—Pero ahora —dijo Clara, sobrenadando en la ola de su pecho— le impongo la más boba de las sospechas que alguien de su categoría haya albergado. Señora, ¡me ha considerado capaz del más mezquino de nuestros vicios! Tenga mi mano, Leticia, amiga mía, ¿quiere? Algo se ha puesto en marcha en mí.

Leticia cogió su mano y vio y sintió que algo estaba pasando.

Clara dijo:

—Es usted una mujer.

Se esforzaba por explicar ese algo.

Las lágrimas asomaron en un momento radiante y cayeron.

Una vez hubieron caído, Clara advirtió al volver a respirar tranquilamente:

—Una imagen alentadora de una rebelde, ¿no es así?

Su compañera musitó unas palabras de consuelo.

—Es poco, nada —dijo Clara, tratando de juntar los labios.

Siguieron caminando, cogidas de la mano, cordialmente.

—Me gusta más este país ahora —dijo la alterada muchacha—. Podría tumbarme en él y pedir solo quedarme dormida. Me gusta pensar que está usted aquí. ¡Qué respeto por sí misma tan noble ha de tener para hablar así! Nuestros sueños de héroes y heroínas empalidecen ante la realidad. Últimamente he estado pensando en mí misma como una expulsada de mi sexo y tener a una mujer buena afín a mí misma... que me quiera. ¡Oh Leticia! Amiga mía, debería besarla y no hacer esta exhibición de mí misma. Si lo considera histeria, ¡ay de usted! Me morderé la lengua cuando apenas había logrado cerrar la boca... ¿No se le ha pasado por la cabeza la idea de los celos? Él se la puso.

—No he aludido a ellos en ningún momento, que yo recuerde.

—No puede imaginar otra razón para mi deseo de liberarme. Me he dado cuenta; es su instinto de valorar a las mujeres como si fueran constantes por naturaleza. Ellas son las agujas y él, el imán. ¡Celosa de usted, señorita Dale! Leticia, ¿puedo hablar?

—Diga lo que quiera.

—Desearía... ¿Sabe cuál es mi nombre de pila?

—Clara.

—¡Por fin! Desearía... es decir, si lo desea usted también. Sí, lo desearía. Luego de la independencia, mi deseo sería ese. Me arriesgo a ofenderla a usted. No permita que su delicadeza se alce en armas contra mí. Desearía que él fuera feliz del único modo como puede hacérsele feliz. Esos son mis celos.

—¿Qué es lo que iba a decir?

—No.

—No creo.

—Iba a decir... y creo que el tormento no me hará tan sincera como usted, Leticia... bueno, si alguna vez lo ha sentido: recuerde, veo sus méritos, me dirijo a su amiga más fiel y reconozco que es atractivo, tiene muchos gustos y hábitos; pero no lo ha sentido... No tengo derecho a preguntar; sé que los hombres tienen sus defectos, no espero que sean santos, yo no lo soy; querría serlo.

—¿No he sentido...? —Leticia la interrumpió.

—Que muy pocas mujeres son capaces de ser completamente sinceras al hablar, por mucho que deseen serlo.

—Han sido educadas de una manera distinta. Una gran desgracia se lo impide.

—Estoy segura de que su respuesta es acertada. ¿Ha conocido alguna vez a una mujer que fuera enteramente Egoísta?

—¿Personalmente? No somos mejores que los hombres.

—No pretendo que lo seamos. Últimamente me he convertido en una Egoísta, sin pensar en nadie más que en mí, maquinando utilizar cada alma con la que me encuentro. Pero las mujeres están en una posición de inferioridad. Apenas han salido del cuarto de los niños cuando un lazo las coge del cuello; si tienen belleza, no es extraño que la conviertan en un arma y hagan todos los cautivos que puedan. ¡No me extraña! Mi sentido de la vergüenza ante mi debilidad natural y la arrogancia de los hombres me llevaría a hacer cientos de cautivos, si eso es la coquetería. No tendría compasión con esas aves altivas, los halcones. Verlos con las alas gachas me divertiría. ¿Hay otro modo de castigarlos?

—Tenga en cuenta lo que perdería al castigarlos.

—Tengo en cuenta lo que ganarían ellos si no.

Leticia supuso que estaba escuchando un discurso sobre la desigualdad en las relaciones entre los sexos. La tranquilizó la sospecha de que el discurso giraba hacia un sentido más íntimo y el color la inundó suavemente cuando Clara dijo:

—Esta es la diferencia que veo; estoy segura de ello: las mujeres a las que se llama coquetas no conquistan a los mejores, pero los hombres que son Egoístas tienen *buenas* mujeres entre sus víctimas, mujeres de cuya devota constancia se alimentan; la beben como si fuera sangre. Estoy segura de no haber adoptado una perspectiva meramente femenina. Se castigan a sí mismas desechando al que sería apropiado para ellas, el que podría darles lo que anhelan tener, y van donde...

Clara se detuvo.

—No tengo su poder para expresar las ideas —dijo.

—Señorita Middleton, tiene usted un poder terrible —dijo Leticia.

Clara sonrió afectuosamente.

—No soy consciente de ninguno. ¿Qué casa es esta?

—La de mi padre. ¿Quiere usted pasar? ¿Al jardín?

Clara advirtió las ventanas rodeadas de hiedra y las rosas del porche. Le dio las gracias a Leticia y dijo:

—Volveré dentro de una hora.

—¿Va a caminar sola? —dijo Leticia incrédulamente, pensando en la consternación de sir Willoughby.

—Confiaré en el camino —repuso Clara, y se volvió, pero retrocedió y le ofreció a Leticia su mejilla para que la besara.

El «terrible poder» de esta joven había impresionado mucho a Leticia y, al besarla, se maravilló de su suavidad y lozanía.

Clara se puso a caminar, inconsciente de tener poder alguno.

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31 Meredith alude al mito de Perseo y Andrómeda.

XVII

El jarrón de porcelana

DURANTE el paseo de Clara con Leticia, la estima hundida de sir Willoughby, como una prenda colgada junto al fuego tras haberse expuesto a una tormenta inclemente, recuperó algo del lustre de su terciopelo en compañía de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, que representaba para él el mundo que temía y trató de mantenerse airoso con todas las armas que podía ejercitar. Ella esperaba que fuera el alegre sir Willoughby y, siendo el aspecto de la dama tan bueno como un ensalmo, sir Willoughby hizo de duende, replicando a todas las ocurrencias. Las reinas gobiernan la corte. La popularidad con los hombres, aunque resulte útil para procurarse el favor de las mujeres, es de poco valor para un caballero sensible, ansioso incluso de pronosticar la aprehensión de su orgullo, su comodidad y su prevalencia. Los hombres son groseramente venales; los buenos vinos pueden con ellos, los buenos cigarros, un aire de camaradas: ni siquiera entonces valen lo que se les paga; avanzaremos a pesar de que nos miren mal. Pero las miradas de las mujeres, de golpe, nos harán ver la diferencia absoluta entre el plumaje señorial del gallo y la muda. Felizmente pueden ser ganadas: una lengua inteligente las gana, una pierna. Estarán con nosotros si la naturaleza está con nosotros; si somos elegantes y discretos; si el sol brilla sobre nosotros y nos ven brillar o si nos han visto bien situados y encantadores al sol. Una vez ganadas, serán nuestros espejos para la vida y mucho más constantes que el cristal. El cuento de su capricho es absurdo. Golpeemos su imaginación una vez y serán nuestras esclavas; solo nos pedirán el servicio corriente del cortesano. Negarán que envejezcamos, nos protegerán del escándalo, no querrán vernos ridículos. El instinto de sir Willoughby, o la piel, o las antenas erguidas le contaron esos misterios de la influencia del sexo: tenía tan poca necesidad de estudiarlos como una dama en entredicho.

Willoughby tenía alguna necesidad de conocerlos, de hecho, y requirió la necesidad de una protección para sí mismo; era intuitivamente un conjurado en defensa propia, de larga vista, sin que le faltara la hierba que tendría que chupar al luchar con una serpiente. Una sensibilidad ágil compensaba la torpeza de lo que veía en el corazón de su enemigo y lo volvía más oscuro, pero milagrosamente activo; al no suponer que su necesidad fuera inmediata, consideró conveniente fascinar a la señora Mountstuart y anticipar posibilidades fantasmales del futuro dejando caer una insinuación, no de la veleidad de Clara, desde luego; de la suya más bien o, con más precisión, de una perspectiva alterada del carácter de Clara. Fue él quien aludió a la *pícara de porcelana* .

Deleitándose en su humor, dijo riéndose:

—Me acerco a eso.

—Recuerde que estoy enamorada de ella —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

—Ese es nuestro castigo.

—Uno muy grato para usted.

Willoughby asintió.

—¿Hay que eliminar a la *pícara?*

—Pregúntemelo cuando sea madre, mi querido sir Willoughby.

—Así es como la interpreté a usted...

—Aceptaré cualquier interpretación que sea halagadora.

—Nadie me satisfará de serlo suficientemente y por eso dejo que el carácter llene el epigrama.

—Hágalo. ¿Qué prisa hay? Que no le confunda su objeción a la pícara; sería razonable si no se la hubiera asegurado.

La puerta de una estancia vacía de horrible reverberación se abrió con esa advertencia.

Trató de decir en broma que no siempre una admiración apasionada sujetaría a la pícara, pero se confundió con la densidad de su consciente trueno y la señora Mountstuart sonrió al verlo despedido de la suave corriente del diálogo hacia las cataratas por una simple alusión al amante de su fortuna. Por necesidad después de una caída, el tono de su conversación se relajó.

—La señorita Dale tiene buen aspecto —dijo Willoughby.

—Excelente: debería casarse —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

Willoughby movió la cabeza.

—Convénzala.

Ella asintió:

—El ejemplo puede tener efecto.

Willoughby pareció extremadamente abstracto.

—Sí, es el momento. ¿Dónde está el hombre que usted recomendaría como complemento suyo? La señorita Dale tiene ahora lo que le faltaba antes, una inteligencia madura que se añade a su feliz disposición, romántica, diría usted. No pienso peor de las mujeres por eso.

—Una pizca.

—Ella lo llama *follaje* .

—Muy bonito.

—¿Ha cedido usted en el caso de su caballo *Achmet?*

—No lo vendo por debajo de cuatrocientos.

—¡Pobre Johnny Busshe! Se olvida usted de que su mujer le escatima su dinero. Es usted un negociante duro, sir Willoughby.

—Querría que el precio fuera prohibitivo.

—Muy bien, y *follaje* es bueno para esconder y buscar, especialmente cuando no hay una pícara emboscada. Eso es lo peor que puedo decir de Leticia Dale. Una devoción exagerada es el escándalo de nuestro sexo. Dicen que es usted el hombre de negocios más duro también en el campo y lo creo, pues en casa y en el extranjero su propósito es lograr lo mejor de todos. Ya ve que no tengo follaje, soy una realidad, calva.

—Sin embargo, mi querida señora Mountstuart, puedo asegurarle que conversar con usted tiene el mismo efecto estimulante sobre mí que conversar con la señorita Dale.

—Pero ¡el follaje!, ¡el follaje! Ustedes, los duros negociadores, no tienen compasión de las solteronas devotas.

—Le he dicho absolutamente cuáles son mis sentimientos.

—Y usted tiene los míos expresados con moderación.

La señora Mountstuart recordó el propósito de su visita matinal, que era invitar al doctor Middleton a cenar con ella y sir Willoughby la condujo a la puerta de la biblioteca.

—Insista —dijo.

A la espera de su reaparición, el ánimo que la charla que había mantenido le había procurado, no sin finalidad, le ayudó a distinguir en toda su horrenda extensión la ofensa que su prometida había cometido contra él. Lo hizo proyectándola cada vez más lejos de sí, de modo que en la distancia suponía menos sus emociones personales, mientras la observación le capacitaba para abarcar su vastedad y, por decirlo así, percibir toda la masa esférica de la culpa de la desgraciada muchacha girando impúdicamente sobre su eje.

Separar una ofensa que nos han hecho y ponerla en el espacio, para medir matemáticamente su peso y tamaño, es un arte; también puede ser un instinto de autoconservación; de otra manera, como cuando las montañas adyacentes a ciudades se derrumban, los desalmados e inicuos podrían asesinar a los hombres de sentimiento. Pero, como arte, quienes practican un arte tan benéfico deberían saber que las circunstancias han de prestar su ayuda. El instinto de sir Willoughby se había embotado y había sido aplastado antes de su conversación con la señora Mountstuart. Ella lo elevó a una de las ideas de sí mismo: con las damas su intención era la del cortesano galo de cualquier periodo desde Luis XIII hasta Luis XV. Podía mimar a aquellos que lo llevaban a hablar con ese carácter, respaldado por la solidez inglesa, naturalmente. El rosbif seguía destacando detrás del suflé y el champán. Además de un caballero inglés que sobresalía entre sus iguales en azarosos saltos en público, era un refinado murmurador, un dialogante vivaz, de momentos ingeniosos, con algo en él —una capacidad para escudriñar— más allá del mero ingenio, como pronto advertían quienes apelaban a sus reservas, y un fondo para el pique. Hasta ahí la idea de sí mismo. Ahora bien, Clara no solo no evocaba nunca esa idea, sino que no respondía a ella, la repelía; no florecía cerca de ella. Willoughby examinaba atentamente estos hechos en sus cálculos ordinarios; era un hombre de honor y ella era una muchacha hermosa, pero el florecimiento accidental de su ideal, con la señora Mountstuart, en los talones mismos de la ofensa de Clara, le devolvió el manejo pleno de su arte de la distancia y la arrojó a un lado, completamente aparte de sí mismo, para contemplar las desgraciadas revoluciones.

Versado profundamente en el Libro del Egoísmo como estaba, conocía la sabiduría de la frase: *Un orgullo herido que no devuelve el golpe se desmorona.* ¿Qué debía golpear? Diez años más joven, Leticia podría haber sido el instrumento. Pensar ahora en ella era absurdo. Junto a Clara tenía la tonalidad del invierno bajo la rama primaveral. La puso a un lado, vejado hasta lo más profundo por una ostentosa decadencia que se contraía comparada con la floreciente criatura a la que tenía que fustigar en defensa propia, de un modo u otro.

La señora Mountstuart estaba en el estribo de su carruaje cuando los parasoles de seda de las jóvenes damas se divisaron en una ladera del parque, donde el verde amarillento de las hayas vestidas de mayo flotaba sobre el pardo suelo de hojas del año anterior.

—¿Quién es el caballero? —preguntó.

Un caballero las escoltaba.

—¿Vernon? ¡No! Está dándole duro a Crossjay —dijo Willoughby.

Vernon y Crossjay salían para la media hora de carrera del muchacho antes de comer. Crossjay divisó a la señorita Middleton y fue corriendo a encontrarse con ella. Vernon lo siguió ociosamente.

—La pícara no tiene primo, ¿no es así? —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

—Es una familia de hijos e hijas únicos durante generaciones —respondió Willoughby.

—¿Y Letty Dale?

—¡Primo! —exclamó él, como si le imputara la riqueza a la señorita Dale, y añadió:

—Ningún varón.

Un enlace de la estación de ferrocarril salió de la avenida al círculo de entrada de la casa. Flitch era el conductor. No tenía derecho a estar allí, estaba haciendo mal, pero lo hacía como empleado para defender a su mujer y a sus hijos y sus despreciativos toques de sombrero aludían a esas disculpas hacia su antiguo amo con el patetismo de un perro.

Sir Willoughby le hizo señas para que se acercara.

—Así que estás aquí —dijo—. Llevas equipaje.

Flitch saltó del calesín y leyó una de las etiquetas: «Teniente coronel H. De Craye».

—¿Y el coronel se encontró con las damas? ¿Las adelantó?

Aquí pareció que a Flitch le resultaba difícil relatar la cuestión.

Empezó con el origen abstracto de todo ello: había perdido su puesto en casa de sir Willoughby y se vio obligado a buscar trabajo donde pudiera encontrarse y, aunque sabía que no tenía derecho a estar donde estaba, esperaba que lo perdonaran por las bocas que tenía que alimentar como enlace adscrito a la estación de ferrocarril, donde ese caballero, el coronel, lo había contratado, y creía que sir Willoughby lo excusaría por llevar a un amigo, el coronel, al que recordaba, y el coronel lo recordaba a él, y le había dicho, sin saber cómo se las arreglaba ahora: «¡Vaya! ¡Flitch! ¿De vuelta a tu antiguo puesto? ¿Me esperan?», y le contó al coronel su desafortunada situación: «No he vuelto, coronel; no tengo esa suerte», y el coronel De Craye era un caballero de buen corazón, como siempre había sido, y le preguntó por su familia. Tal vez lo privaran del pobre trabajo que estaba haciendo ahora; así es la desgracia cuando arponea a un hombre; puedes saltar, y volar, pero te atrapa una vez haces una locura. «¿Podría pedirle humildemente, si fuera usted tan bueno, sir Willoughby?», dijo Flitch, pasando a la prueba del triste contratiempo. Abrió la puerta del calesín y mostró los fragmentos de porcelana rota.

—Pero ¿qué? ¿Cuál es la historia de esto? —exclamó sir Willoughby.

—¿Qué es eso? —dijo la señora Mountstuart, aguzando el oído.

—Era un jarrón —respondió Flitch con un tono elegíaco.

—¡Un jarrón de porcelana! —interpretó sir Willoughby.

—¡China! —gritó levemente la señora Mountstuart.

Tomó una de las piezas para inspeccionarla.

Se la acercó, la alejó. Suspiró terriblemente.

—¡Habría sido mejor que ese hombre se colgara! —dijo.

Flitch encogió sus rasgos y miembros transidos de desgracia para continuar su dolorosa narración.

—¿Cómo ha ocurrido esto? —le preguntó perentoriamente sir Willoughby.

Flitch apeló a su antiguo amo como testigo de que era un buen conductor, cuidadoso.

Sir Willoughby tronó:

—Te digo que digas cómo ha ocurrido.

—¡Ni una gota, mi señora! No desde la cena de anoche, si hay algo de verdad en mí —dijo Flitch, implorando el socorro de la señora Mountstuart.

—Conduce bien —dijo ella, apoyándolo.

Su narración fue entonces directa.

Cerca del molino de Piper, donde el arroyo de Wicker cruza el camino de Rebdon, uno de los vagones de Hoppner, sobrecargado como de costumbre, forzaba a los caballos colina arriba cuando Flitch descendía a paso lento y se vio a sí mismo entre el carro de Hoppner y una joven que avanzaba; justo entonces el carretero hizo restallar el látigo y los caballos casi enloquecieron. La joven dama quedó expuesta al carro y el coronel saltó y, para salvar a la joven dama, Flitch se estrelló y la salvó, dando gracias al cielo por ello y más cuando se dio cuenta de quién era la joven.

—¿Estaba sola? —dijo sir Willoughby, trágicamente sorprendido, mirando a Flitch.

—Muy bien, usted la salvó y volcó el calesín.

La señora Mountstuart lo apoyó.

—Bartlett, nuestro antiguo encargado, fue testigo, señora; tuve que salir a la cuneta y es cierto, allá se fue el calesín y los jarrones se estrellaron contra la piedra miliar, justo como si *ese* fuera su destino. Nadie

salió herido ni se golpeó contra nada más. Todo estaba hecho añicos, por lo que a Bartlett y a mí nos llevó diez minutos recogerlo todo, hasta la pieza más pequeña, y él dijo, y yo no podía dejar de pensarlo, que hubo una providencia en ello, pues todos hemos venido para que pueda usted decir que tuvimos que hacer lo que hicimos.

—De modo que Horacio decidió prudentemente caminar con las damas en lugar de confiar sus miembros de nuevo a ese zozobrante calesín —le dijo sir Willoughby a la señora Mountstuart, y ella repuso:

—Por fortuna nadie ha resultado herido.

Ambos miraron la nariz del pobre Flitch y simultáneamente emitieron el veredicto de «Hum».

La señora Mountstuart le dio al desgraciado media corona de su bolsa. Sir Willoughby dio instrucciones al lacayo para que descargara el calesín y reuniera cuidadosamente los fragmentos de porcelana, y le pidió a Flitch que se diera prisa en marcharse.

—¡El regalo de bodas del coronel! Volveré mañana —la señora Mountstuart agitó la mano en señal de despedida.

—¡Venga todos los días! Sí, supongo que podemos adivinar el destino del jarrón.

Se inclinó y ella exclamó:

—Bueno, ahora el regalo puede compartirse si alguno de los dos está por la división.

A pesar del chirrido de las ruedas del carruaje Willoughby oyó: «En cualquier caso, había una grieta en *esa* porcelana» [32] .

Esas son las bofetadas que obtenemos de un mundo desatento.

En cuanto al jarrón, la pérdida fue de Horace De Craye. Tendría que procurar un regalo de bodas y decididamente no en forma de añicos. Tenía el aspecto de un jarrón costoso, pero esa no era ahora la cuestión. ¿Qué significaba que Clara hubiera sido vista caminando sola por la carretera? ¿Qué trampa, remontable *ad inferos,* había inducido a Willoughby Patterne a hacer de ella la depositaria y fortaleza de su honor?

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32 Como hemos dicho en una nota del capítulo V, Meredith juega con la ambigüedad de la palabra *rogue,* que significa tanto «pícara» como «grieta» en la porcelana.

XVIII

El coronel De Craye

CLARA llegó charlando y riendo con el coronel De Craye, con la mano del joven Crossjay debajo del brazo y el parasol resplandeciente, una ofensora deslumbrante, como si deseara obligar al espectador a reconocer a la refinada pícara de porcelana, realmente hermosa de una manera insufrible: perfecta en estatura y gracia de movimientos, con el pelo exquisitamente rizado, los labios encarnados con un color que destacaba a distancia en su piel marfileña: una vista que hacía bailar al bosque y volver las cabezas en la ciudad. Aunque hermosa, un jurado de críticos de arte podría pronunciarse en contra. La belleza condena los rasgos irregulares. Hermosa figura, dirían. Una descripción de su figura y su manera de andar le habría valido todas las alabanzas y vestía de una manera que realzaba su talle y el vuelo se correspondía con el espíritu de un día de verano. Calipso, la habría llamado el doctor Middleton. Fijémonos en el abedul plateado con la brisa: se hincha y dispersa, se pliega y se extiende como una banderola y muestra el blanco resplandor del tronco en su interior, como si negara que fuera visible, con un susurro entre las ramas, mientras sigue asomándose la blancura. Clara tenía el arte maravilloso de vestirse a tono con la estación y el cielo. Ese día su arte acompañaba de un modo deslumbrante a su rostro dulcemente iluminado: demasiado dulce, demasiado significativo y vivaz para ser bonito según la estricta severidad para la belleza. La sombrerería nos diría que llevaba una pañoleta de leve muselina blanca que le cruzaba un vestido de la misma materia, entreverado de rosa oscuro. Llevaba un gran parasol gris de seda con estampados verdes en los bordes y, en el brazo que ofrecía a Crossjay, una tira de hiedra y en la mano un ramillete de largos tallos de hierba. Esos tintes de rosa oscuro y verde y verde pálido se mezclaban y entretejían en el ondulante vestido blanco que se extendía mansamente como un valle, como un yate antes de arriar las velas, pero ella no caminaba como si esperase el soplo de viento, sino que más bien parecía un día de viento sur que empujara las nubes, apenas conmovidas, fundiendo el color y variando sus rasgos de la risa a la sonrisa, como con un placer sereno parecido a los cielos por encima de la brisa.

Sir Willoughby, como frecuentemente había tenido ocasión de hacerle saber a Clara, no era un poeta: era un caballero inglés más cándido de lo habitual en su manifiesto disgusto por el sinsentido, la verbosidad y el verso del poeta, nada de lo cual lo había intimidado de sentir por él un silencioso desprecio, un sentimiento que puede dormitar y no ha de ser defendido. Sir Willoughby detestaba al tipo, luchaba contra el tipo. Pero coincidía con el poeta en ese tema prevaleciente del verso: los encantos de las mujeres. Para su desgracia, sir Willoughby era intensamente susceptible y, allí donde llevaba a los demás a admirar, su admiración se convertía en furia. Podía ver enseguida que Horace De Craye admiraba a la señorita Middleton. Horacio era un hombre de gusto; apenas podía hacer otra cosa, no podía hacer otra cosa que admirar, pero ¡qué curioso era que, al describir a Clara y a la señorita Dale, en su propia contemplación y comparación de las dos, sir Willoughby hubiera dado una señal de aprobación a la apariencia de su prometida! No le había dado importancia últimamente.

La conducta de Clara y, sobre todo, si no lo principal, que su amigo Horacio la hubiera descubierto, que se hubiera encontrado favorablemente con ella, aumentaba una sensación dolorosa tan insólita en él que tenía motivos para indignarse. Llegado a esa situación, su admiración por la muchacha que lo había herido era tan amarga como un hombre pueda sentir. El resentimiento, alimentado por los principales impulsos de su naturaleza, se convirtió en ajenjo y no había una pizca de admiración cuando decidió castigarla con una indicación formal de su desprecio. La alegría de Clara le sonaba a la risa oída a la sombra del púlpito.

—¡Te has escapado! —le dijo a Clara mientras estrechaba la mano de su amigo y le daba cordialmente la bienvenida—. ¡Mi querido camarada! Por cierto, has pasado por un apuro, le he oído decir a Flitch.

—¿Yo, Willoughby? Nada de eso —dijo el coronel—. Entramos en un calesín para salir de él y el bueno de Flitch me ayudó a entrar y salir, quitándole el polvo a mi chaqueta. Lo único que ha podido ir mal es que la señorita Middleton ha tenido que echarse atrás algo apresuradamente.

—¿Conociste enseguida a la señorita Middleton?

—Flitch me hizo el favor de presentarme. Primero me precipitó a los pies de la señorita Middleton y luego me presentó, a la vieja manera oriental, a mi soberana.

El rostro de sir Willoughby fue suficiente para su amigo Horacio. Dándose media vuelta hacia Clara, dijo:

—Ese es el lugar que ocuparé de por vida, señorita Middleton, aunque no siempre seamos tan afortuna-

dos que tengamos una brillante excusa para ocuparlo desde el principio.

Clara dijo:

—Felizmente no resultó herido, coronel De Craye.

—Estaba en manos de los Amores. No las Gracias, me temo. Una imagen de mí mismo. ¡Querida, no! Mi querido Willoughby, nunca tendrás una declaración tan apresurada como esa. Habría podido parecer un impulso magnífico si hubiera podido escoger mejor la postura. La señorita Middleton no se rio. Al menos no vi otra cosa que compasión.

—No me habías escrito —dijo Willoughby.

—Porque fue un viaje a cara o cruz entre Irlanda o aquí y he venido aquí para no ir allí; por cierto, traía conmigo una jarra para ofrecérsela a los dioses de la mala suerte y han sido propicios.

—¿No iba empaquetada en una caja?

—No, iba envuelta en papel para mostrar su elegante forma. Me encapriché de ella en la tienda ayer y la traía conmigo esta mañana para presentársela a la señorita Middleton a mediodía, sin formalidades.

Willoughby conocía el humor de su amigo cuando su lengua irlandesa amenazaba con agitarse.

—Ya ve lo que ha pasado —le dijo a Clara.

—Lo lamento en la medida en que es culpa mía —respondió ella.

—Flitch dice que el accidente ocurrió al desviarse a la cuneta para salvarte de las ruedas.

—Flitch puede decir lo que se le ocurra al gollete de su botella de whisky vacía —dijo Horace De Craye —. Y luego ponerle el corcho.

—La consecuencia es que el jarrón de porcelana se ha roto. No deberías ir sola por la carretera, Clara. Has de tener compañía, siempre. Es la regla aquí.

—Había dejado a la señorita Dale en su casa.

—Tendrías que haberte llevado los perros.

—¿Habrían protegido el jarrón?

Horace De Craye se pavoneó cordialmente.

—Me temo que no, señorita Middleton. Que nos lleven los diablos si hemos de proteger los jarrones: flotan por aquí sin que les importemos, lo que explica la confusión en política y en la sociedad y la subida de precio de los palos de escoba que demuestra que es cierto, como nos han contado, que todos los rincones y esquinas necesitan un buen barrido. La señorita Dale está radiante —dijo De Craye, deseando divertir a Willoughby de su rabia con su sentido del humor y con su sinsentido.

—No has visitado Irlanda últimamente —dijo sir Willoughby.

—No, ni hecho amistad con actor alguno en un papel de irlandés en drama alguno que transcurra en la verde isla. Ese Flitch, mi querido Willoughby, ha removido lo nativo que hay en mí y te lo presentaremos por un buen oficio parecido cuando oigamos, al pasar de los años, que tu frente no se ha arrugado ni una vez ante su dama soberana. Acepta que vuelva a casa el pobre diablo, ¿quieres? Está loco por volver a la mansión. Te digo, Willoughby, que será una buena acción traerlo de vuelta. Piensa en ello; harás lo popular, estoy seguro. Tengo la superstición de que Flitch haya de traerte desde la puerta de la iglesia. Si hubiéramos tenido suerte, me habría traído a mí.

—Es un borracho, Horacio.

—Confunde su pobre nariz. Es la unción del exilio. Hay pruebas severas por debajo. Bebe para endurecer su corazón, porque lo tiene. Déjame interceder por el pobre Flitch.

—Ni una palabra sobre él. Abandonó este lugar.

—Para probar fortuna en el mundo, como hacen los mejores entre nosotros, aunque la librea nos persiga para decirnos que no somos un caballero independiente y llegue un día en que volvamos a ponernos la chaqueta de botones dorados con un ¡Ja! de satisfacción. Harás lo popular. La señorita Middleton se une a la súplica.

—No hay súplica.

—Cuando jure por mi elocuencia, Willoughby, obtendré tu perdón para el pobre diablo.

—Ni una palabra sobre él.

—¡Solo una!

Sir Willoughby batalló contra sí mismo para reprimir un estado de ánimo que lo habría puesto en desventaja frente a su enaltecido amigo Horacio. Por lo común disfrutaba de esos accesos irlandeses suyos, que eran la diversión de Horacio, a veces involuntariamente y que otras indicaban un atolondramiento que podía llegar a ser molesto. De Craye, como Willoughby le había recordado a menudo, era propiamente normando. La sangre de dos o tres madres irlandesas en su ascendencia, sin embargo, era suficiente para hacerlo bailar y, aunque su hermoso perfil hablaba de la raza más fuerte, sus ojos y la contracción de sus mejillas, y muchas de sus cualidades, eran una prueba del legado materno.

—Ya he dicho lo que tenía que decir de él —respondió Willoughby.

—Pero yo he apostado por tu corazón contra tu palabra y no puedo permitirme perder, y esa es una doble razón para revocarla.

—No veo ninguna. Aquí están las señoras.

—Piensa en la pobre bestia, Willoughby.

—Espero una ocupación mejor.

—Si empuja una carretilla hasta la casa será más feliz que a bordo de un carruaje. Se le ha roto el corazón.

—Ha roto demasiadas cosas, mi querido Horacio.

—¡Oh! ¡El jarrón! ¡La porcelana! —cantó De Craye—. Bueno, hablaremos con él dentro de un rato.

—Si te complace, pero mis reglas no admiten enmienda.

—¿Son inalterables? Como las de aquel pueblo que habría podido llevar un abrigo de plomo por el consuelo que obtenía de su jactancia. La belleza de las leyes para las criaturas humanas reside en su adaptabilidad a nuevas costuras.

El coronel De Craye secundó a su jefe para inclinarse ante las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel.

Sir Willoughby había adivinado quién había inspirado a su amigo Horacio que suplicara de una manera tan pertinaz e inoportuna por Flitch y eso no había mejorado su ánimo ni la firmeza de sus réplicas; había sentido una punzada de dolor por el contraste del aire sencillo, hilarante, brillante y musical de su amigo Horacio con su propia firmeza y había visto también que el rostro de Clara reflejaba el contraste: había sido fatalmente empujado a exagerar su descontento, lo que no le devolvió la serenidad. Habría aprendido más de lo que su abrupto encogerse de hombros le había impedido contemplar. Hubo un intercambio de miradas entre el coronel De Craye y la señorita Middleton, espontáneo por ambas partes. La de De Creye decía: «Estaba usted en lo cierto»; la de ella: «Lo sabía». La mirada de Clara era más tranquila y, tras el primer instante, se nubló como agotada por la semejanza; la de De Craye era brillante, sorprendida, especulativa y admiradora, llena de compasión: una mirada preparada para una revelación, que convocaba las huestes del asombro para cuestionar los hechos extraños.

Todo esto le había pasado inadvertido a sir Willoughby. El observador era el único que habría podido proporcionar la clave del secreto. La señorita Dale había encontrado al coronel De Craye en compañía de la señorita Middleton a la entrada. Estaban riéndose y hablando como viejos amigos, De Craye todo lo irlandés que podía ser, y la lengua irlandesa y los modales de caballero eran un desafío irresistible en los primeros pasos de la familiaridad cuando el accidente rompió el hielo. Flitch era su tema y «¡Oh! Si vamos a Willoughby juntos y hacemos una genuflexión y solicitamos el perdón para el señor Flitch, ¿no se ablandará ante esa pareja de suplicantes?». La señorita Middleton dijo que no lo haría. El coronel De Craye apostó que sí; conocía mejor a Willoughby. La señorita Middleton parecía seria; una manera de afirmar la opinión contraria que habla de una experiencia triste. «Ya veremos», dijo el coronel. Hablaban como una pareja que hubiera descubierto inesperadamente un dialecto común entre extraños. ¿Puede haber un final para eso cuando se encuentran dos personas así? Parloteaban, llenaban los minutos como si tuvieran que separarse violentamente a una señal y hubieran de gastarlos mientras pudieran; es un encuentro de arroyos de montaña; no un coloquio sino una caza, en la que no es posible decir qué pasa, qué vendrá a continuación ni cuál es el tema: tan interlingüísticos resultan y tan rápidamente intercambian sus réplicas. Tras su conversación de una hora antes, Leticia contempló sorprendida la ligereza de la señorita Middleton. Clara irradiaba alegría. Un muchacho en una corriente de verano no habría mostrado una renovación más cordial de todo su ser. Leticia no podía entender la idea que Vernon tenía del ingenio de la señorita Middleton. Parecía como si también ella tuviera sangre irlandesa. Hablando de Irlanda, la señorita Middleton dijo que tenía primas allí, sus únicos parientes.

—La risa me lo dijo —dijo el coronel De Craye.

Leticia y Vernon caminaban arriba y abajo por el césped. El coronel De Craye hablaba con seriedad inglesa con las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. Clara y el joven Crossjay se alejaron.

—Si yo pudiera dar consejo diría que no dejara la casa enseguida, aún no —le dijo Leticia a Vernon.

—¿Ya lo sabe, entonces?

—No logro entender por qué me ha dado su confianza.

—Yo se lo aconsejé.

—Pero no puedo ver con qué objeto.

—Hablar le ha hecho bien.

—Pero ¡qué caprichosa! ¡Qué veleidosa!

—Mejor ahora que después.

—Seguramente solo tiene que pedir ser liberada, pedirlo con seriedad, si ese es su deseo.

—Está usted en un error.

—¿Por qué no se lo confía a su padre?

—Tendrá que hacerlo. Querría ahorrárselo.

—No podrá ahorrárselo si quiere romper el compromiso.

—Ella pensaba en ahorrarle el disgusto. Ahora habrá un forcejeo en el que él tendrá que tomar parte.

—¿Piensa ella acaso que él no estará de su lado?

—No tiene instinto para la astucia. La juzga usted con dureza.

—Me conmovió durante el paseo. Al llegar a casa me he sentido de otra manera.

Vernon miró al coronel De Craye.

—Ella necesita una *buena* guía —siguió Leticia.

—No tiene idea de traición.

—¿Lo cree así? Tal vez sea cierto. Pero parece desprovista por nacimiento de paciencia, demasiado imprudente. Hay cierto aire salvaje... La juzgo por su forma de hablar; en eso parece sincera. No practica la ocultación. Naturalmente sir Willoughby lo considerará incomprensible. Para mí es la conducta de una criatura por domar. Él podría obligarla a cumplir su palabra y estar justificado.

—¡Ha de tener cuidado con eso!

—¿No es eso más duro que cualquier cosa que yo haya dicho de ella?

—No me han designado para alabarla. Me imagino interpretando el caso y es un caso de incompatibilidad de caracteres. No podemos decir qué persona es apropiada para nosotros; nos golpea como un rayo.

—¿Que *no* sea apropiada para nosotros? Oh no, eso viene por grados.

—Sí, pero la acumulación de la evidencia, o de la sensibilidad, si lo prefiere, es combustible; no tenemos la chispa a nuestra disposición: puede ser tarde. Usted argumenta a favor de la señorita Middleton. Considérela una muchacha generosa e impulsiva, harta.

—¿De qué?

—De todo, de la grandeza de Willoughby, si usted quiere. Él vuela demasiado alto para ella, podríamos decir.

—Sir Willoughby ¿un águila?

—Ella puede haberse cansado de su nido de águilas.

El sonido de esas palabras en boca de Vernon le trajo a la cabeza la idea de que Vernon comprendía completamente a sir Willoughby y de su tímido conocimiento, aunque él no fuera un hombre que jugara con las palabras.

Si Vernon había aliviado su corazón al insistir en la primera sílaba, fue solo un descanso momentáneo. Vernon tenía el ceño fruncido.

—Pero no puedo imaginar lo que ella espera que yo haga al confiarme su situación —dijo Leticia.

—Ninguno de nosotros sabe qué hacer. Dependemos de Willoughby, que depende de lo que sea que lo sostenga: estamos metidos en un enjambre.

—Ya ve la sabiduría de quedarse, señor Whitford.

—Ha de terminar en un día o dos. Sí, me quedo.

—Ella se inclina por obedecerle a usted.

—Lamentaría poner en juego mi autoridad sobre su obediencia. Hemos de tomar una decisión sobre Crossjay y lograr el dinero para su preparador, si es que lo logramos. Si no, puedo encontrar a un hombre que me fíe. Quiero sacar de aquí al muchacho. Willoughby ha usado con él la melodía del caballero y lo ha fascinado. Cuando me refiero a *su obediencia,* quiero decir que ella no está en situación, ni en condiciones, de ser guiada a ciegas por cualquiera. Ha de confiar en sí misma, hacerlo todo por sí misma. Es un nudo que no puede deshacer otra mano que no sea la suya.

—Temo... —dijo Leticia.

—No tenga ese temor.

—Que obtenga su rechazo absoluto.

—Willoughby tendrá que atenerse a las consecuencias.

—Usted no piensa en ella.

Vernon miró a su acompañante.

XIX

El coronel De Craye y Clara Middleton

La señorita Middleton acabó su paseo con Crossjay atando la tira de hiedra en una corona alrededor del sombrero del muchacho y fijando su ramillete de hierbas en la corona. Luego le pidió que se sentara en el suelo junto a un gran rododendro y esperara a que volviera. Crossjay la había informado del propósito que albergaba de irse con una horda de muchachos a anidar en grandes árboles y marcar los lugares donde podía atacarse a las avispas en otoño. Ella lo consideró un asunto peligroso y, como la campana de la cena del muchacho surtía poco efecto sobre él cuando estaba planeando cosas como esas, quiso asegurarse tolerablemente del muchacho mediante el encanto que creía que podía ejercer en chiquillos de su edad. «Prométeme que no te moverás de aquí hasta que vuelva y cuando venga te daré un beso». Crossjay lo prometió. Ella lo dejó y lo olvidó.

Viendo por su reloj que faltaban quince minutos para que sonara la campana, la decisión repentina de hablar con su padre sin más dilación le dio un impulso supersticioso de abandonar su vaga intención y ser directa. Clara sabía lo que era bueno para ella; lo sabía con más claridad que por la mañana. «¡Irme enseguida!», gritó. No podía haber dudas. ¿Las había tenido antes? Pero por la mañana no había sospechado en ella una capacidad para el mal ni la necesidad acuciante de salvarse de sí misma. No era pura por naturaleza: tal vez criemos almas santas; era pura por voluntad: fuego antes que hielo. Al empezar a ver los elementos de los que estaba hecha, no los mezcló en un montón con su dulce aspecto. Añadió a su cuenta algo de fortaleza, mucha debilidad; casi se atrevió a mirar sin parpadear una peligrosa tendencia al mal. Su destello la llevó hasta su padre.

«Ha de sacarme de aquí enseguida; mañana».

Deseaba ahorrarle las cosas a su padre. Era tan implacable consigo misma que, al vacilar si contarle su cambio de sentimientos hacia sir Willoughby, no toleraba que fuera a atribuírselo ella misma a la consideración ansiosa de una hija por la soledad de su padre, una idea que se había permitido con anterioridad. Reconociendo que era imperativo que hablara, comprendió que se había refrenado incluso hasta infligirse a sí misma la humillación de dilatar su congoja ante los demás debido al más necio de los deseos humanos de conservar la coherencia de su reputación. Había oído hablar de mujeres maltratadas por superficiales y veleidosas; había oído a su padre denunciarlas por girar como veletas y su repetido *quid femina possit* —debido a su sexo—, y también por parecer una excepción a su sexo, esta criatura razonadora deseaba que la juzgaran coherente.

Justo en el momento de dirigirse a él, diciendo «Padre», una nota de seriedad en su oído la convenció de que la ocasión de decirlo todo no había llegado aún y rápidamente interpuso un «Papá» y lo ayudó a parecer más ligero. Pronunció la petición de que se la llevara de allí.

—¿A Londres? —dijo el doctor Middleton—. No sé quién nos acogerá.

—¿A Francia, papá?

—Eso significa vivir en hoteles.

—Solo dos o tres semanas.

—¡Semanas! Me he comprometido a cenar con la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson dentro de cinco días, es decir, el jueves.

—¿No podemos encontrar una excusa?

—¿Romper un compromiso? No, querida, ni siquiera para escapar de beber el vino de una viuda.

—¿Nos obliga una palabra?

—Vaya, ¿qué si no?

—Creo que no me encuentro bien.

—Llamaremos a ese hombre que conocimos en la cena, Corney, un médico de la ciudad, un médico de anécdotas pasadas de moda. ¿Cómo es que no te encuentras bien, amor mío? Tienes buen aspecto. No puedo imaginar que no estés bien.

—Solo necesito un cambio de aires, papá.

—Ya estamos: ¡un cambio! *Semper eadem!* Las mujeres querrían cambiar de aires en el paraíso; un cambio de ángeles, también, supongo. ¡Cambiar de unos cuarteles como estos a un hotel francés sería un descenso! *Es este el lugar, esta triste melancolía por aquella luz celestial* [33] . Me encuentro muy a gusto aquí en la biblioteca. Ese excelente Whitford y yo hemos pasado muy buenos días y me gusta por plantarle cara a al-

guien mayor y mejor.

—Se marcha.

—No sé nada de eso y no daré crédito al cuento hasta que lo sepa. Es obstinado y responde a impulsos.

El pecho de Clara se hinchó. La insurrección muda amenazaba sus ojos.

Una llovizna con viento sur golpeteó en los cristales y le sugirió al doctor Middleton temblorosas visiones del paso del canal a bordo de un barco.

—Cornell te verá: es muy brillante en persona, probablemente analfabeto, si puedo juzgar por una interrupción de mi discurso cuando se sentó delante de mí, pero lo suficientemente instruido como para respetar la enseñanza y redactar su prescripción. No pido más de los hombres ni de los médicos.

El doctor Middleton dijo esto mientras se levantaba, mirando el reloj y el dorso de sus manos.

—*Quod autem secundum litteras difficillimum ese artificium?* Pero ¿cuál, después de las letras, es la práctica más difícil? *Ego puto medicum* [34] . El médico después del erudito, aunque no recuerdo haberle pedido que viviera después que yo ni esperaba que una hija mía necesitara esa leche. Es hija mía, del sexo inexplicable: le enviaremos un mensaje a Corney. Tendrás un cambio enseguida, querida, que satisfará a la más anhelante de las mujeres, si Willoughby, como supongo, sigue la moda neotérica de pasar la luna de miel en tren: ¡imagen adecuada, exposición y perpetuación del estado de la manía que conduce a la institución! En mi época preferíamos incubar la felicidad; teníamos que pensar en cazarla a través de un continente, metidos en un barullo y cubiertos de polvo en aras de la divinidad que buscábamos. Una generación menor sacrifica en el altar de la excitación. Polvo y confusión han de ser por fuerza la cosa. Ese es tu mundo moderno. Ahora, querida, vamos a lavarnos las manos. Las campanas de mediodía esperan una atención inmediata. No saben de antesalas.

Clara siguió donde estaba, desesperada por la oportunidad perdida. El doctor Middleton había advertido su figura y ojos contraídos y había hablado magistralmente para mitigar y sobrellevar ese algo desagradable que prefiguraba su apariencia.

—¿No desprecias a tu hija, padre?

—No lo hago, no podría; la quiero, quiero a mi hija. Pero no necesitas zumbar como una mosca para plantearme esa pregunta, querida.

—Entonces, padre, dile a sir Willoughby hoy que nos tenemos que ir mañana. Volverás a tiempo para cenar con la señora Mountstuart. Nos acogerán los amigos, los Darleton, los Erpingham. Podemos ir a Oxford, donde te darán la bienvenida. Me recuperaré enseguida. No menciones a los médicos. Pero ya ves que estoy nerviosa. Me avergüenza, puedo reírme de ello, pero no puedo superarlo, y creo que un día o dos lograrán que me restablezca. Di que lo harás. Dilo con el lenguaje del Libro de las Primeras Lecciones. Cualquier cosa por encima de la cartilla hace que me estalle la cabeza.

El doctor Middleton se encogió de hombros y extendió luego sus brazos.

—¿Cargo de embajador tuyo ante Willoughby, Clara? Me pones en el papel de la pelota entre dos bateadores. El juego está asegurado, el prólogo es una cámara de aire. Parece que estoy instruido en los misterios del erotismo esotérico, aunque doy mi palabra de no ser más sabio. Si Willoughby tiene que oír algo de ti, tendrá que oírlo de tus labios.

—Sí, padre, sí. Tenemos diferencias. No estoy preparada para discusiones ahora. Estoy aturdida. Quiero evitar una enfermedad. Él y yo... Me acuso a mí misma.

—La campana —exclamó el doctor Middleton—. Lo discutiré con Willoughby.

—¿Después de comer?

—En algún momento, antes de la campana de la cena. No puedo sujetarme al minuto exacto de mi reloj, mi querida niña, y déjame decirte, para la siguiente ocasión en la que juntes las vocales E y A, en palabras separadas, que la E debe poder oírse. Es una vulgarización de la lengua que te acusa. No me gusta que mi hija sea culpable de ello.

Sonrió para moderar la severidad de la corrección y la besó en la frente.

Clara adujo que no podía sentarse a comer. Se fue a su habitación después de pedirle seriamente que le hiciera saber que había hablado. No derramó una sola lágrima y se regocijó con su dominio de sí misma, que le susurró una palabra de auténtico valor cuando había dado muestras de lo contrario.

La lluvia y el sol alternaron durante las primeras horas de la tarde como una procesión de manos oscuras y hermosas. Llegó la sombra y Clara estaba tranquila. La luz tiñó de amarillo la humedad y ella enterró su rostro para que la jovialidad no la sorprendiera. Creyendo que le dolía la cabeza, se afligió a sí misma con los peores síntomas y se oprimió tan firmemente que su ocupación consistió en especular sobre el modesto entusiasmo de Leticia Dale por los placeres rurales, por este lugar en especial, con su rico follaje y sus asomos de paz en el paisaje. La perspectiva de escapar a todo eso le inspiró pensamientos de un amable rumbo de la vida en el que el sol no fuera una desnuda bola de fuego, sino un amigo vestido de bosque; donde parque y pasto dejaran paso a rasgos conocidos del este y el oeste y las distantes colinas en torno, y los ho-

gares de las pobres granjas también —cuya simpatía le garantizaba la bondad—, fueran familiares, entrañables para quienes habitasen en ellas, día y noche. Amaba las flores, la celosa felicidad de las estaciones; los poetas la hacían estremecerse, los libros la absorbían. Se aferraba a esos sentimientos sinceros, que arraigaban en nuestra tierra; los necesitaba mientras apretaba la mano sobre los ojos, consciente de actuar como una inválida, aunque las razones que se daba para languidecer con dolor de cabeza fueran tan convincentes que su cerebro rechazaba creer en ellas y daba pie a producir unas palpitaciones reales. De otra manera no habría tenido excusa para encerrarse en su habitación. Vernon Whitford se habría mostrado escéptico. Con dolor de cabeza o no, el coronel De Craye debía estar pensando de una manera extraña sobre ella; no le había mostrado señal alguna de enfermedad. La risa y la charla del coronel hablaban de ella y dispersaban la ficción; él mismo era la brisa marina que recompone los nervios. Las ideas de Clara se volvieron hacia sir Willoughby y ya no tuvieron más coherencia que la espuma de un torrente.

Pronto sus sentimientos variaron de dirección. Su doncella Barclay le trajo esta línea escrita a lápiz por su padre: *Factum est; letus est; amantium irae &* .

Que estuviera hecho, que Willoughby le hubiera dado un aire de alegre aquiescencia y su padre hubiera asumido la existencia de una riña de enamorados fue maravilloso para ella a primera vista, al minuto siguiente. Willoughby debía de estar harto de ella y le alegraba dejarla ir. Sabía que no habría retorno. Clara le agradecía la insinuación del *amantium irae,* aunque rechazaba la locura del verso. Entonces contempló el querido paisaje desde la ventana. ¡Feliz la dama del lugar si puede elegirlo! Clara le envidió el cerezo silvestre de doble floración, nada más. ¡Una ramita suya, si no había perdido el color como la nieve alpina en los hoyos más profundos, y podría irse, llevándose un recuerdo de lo mejor que había aquí! Su ficción del dolor de cabeza ya no la apenó. Cambió su vestido de muselina por otro de seda; se contentó con el primer bonete que Barclay le presentó. Amable con cualquiera en la casa, Willoughby incluido, abrió la ventana, respiró, bendijo a la humanidad y pensó: «Si Willoughby abriera su corazón a la naturaleza se libraría de su funesta opinión del mundo». La naturaleza brillaba entonces renovada por las últimas gotas de una cortina de lluvia y disponía favorablemente a la vuelta de su optimismo jovial. Una punzada de hambre, de verdadera hambre, desconocida en ella últimamente, se añadió a su perspectiva de salud sin urgirla a satisfacerla; se inclinaba más por demorarla en aras de la vigorosa actividad de los miembros que le estaba proporcionando y, al estilo de las jóvenes de corazón ligero, bajó las escaleras como una cascada y, como el meteoro observado mientras se desvanece su trazo, pasó junto al coronel De Craye y entró en una de las estancias de la casa.

Él miró de reojo la puerta entreabierta.

Solo tenemos que recordar que el hábito de los deportivos caballeros de vida relajada, sorprendidos como lo estarían de otro modo por las tretas, giros y mudanzas del sexo perseguido, consiste en clasificar a las mujeres hermosas, y algunas vuelan y otras corren; esas aves son de alas salvajes y otras ponen a tiro su pecho. Para ellos no hay mujeres individuales. Son nuestros asnos inmortales a la hora de aprender a distinguirlas como una variedad personal, de un brote separado.

La mirada de reojo del coronel De Craye a la puerta decía que había visto pasar a una embravecida coqueta. Tenía su excusa para formarse juicio. Ella había hablado extrañamente de la caída de su regalo de bodas, extrañamente de Willoughby, o había un toque de extrañeza en una alusión a su futuro marido, y había tratado a Willoughby de una manera extraña cuando se encontraron. Sobre todo, lo que había dicho de Flitch era curioso. ¡Y ese aspecto suyo! Y luego había transferido sus atenciones al amigo de Willoughby. Tras un coloquio encantador, el más dulce parloteo que había disfrutado con una muchacha, a ella le dio un dolor de cabeza para evitarlo y por fin manifestaba ceguera con el mismo propósito.

Se sentía herido, pero juzgó preferible sentirse desafiado.

La señorita Middleton salió por otra puerta. Había visto al coronel al pasar junto a él, cuando era demasiado tarde para manifestar su reconocimiento, y ahora se dirigió a él con el aire de haberlo saludado al pasar.

—¿No hay nadie? —dijo—. ¿Estoy sola en la casa?

—Hay un cero —dijo él—, pero es mejor aniquilarlo y no contarlo en absoluto si se pone usted en el lado equivocado y desea estar a solas en la casa.

—¿Dónde está Willoughby?

—En sus asuntos.

—¿Ha salido a caballo?

—*Achmet* es el caballo y le ruego que no deje que lo venda, señorita Middleton. Han delegado en mí para atenderla.

—Me gustaría dar un paseo.

—¿Ya se ha repuesto?

—Perfectamente.

—¿Tiene ánimos?

—Nunca me he encontrado mejor.

—Esa fue la respuesta del fantasma de la mujer del viejo malvado cuando volvió a persuadirlo de que le quedaba una oportunidad. Entonces, dice él, creeré en el cielo si rompes esa botella, y la botella se rompió y él se suicidó, no sin sospechar que ella le había tendido una trampa. Estos aguaceros que pasan y dejan dulces aromas son divinos, señorita Middleton. Tengo el privilegio del nombre cristiano el día de la boda. Este parque de Willoughby es una de las mejores cosas de Inglaterra. Hay una vista del lago que recuerda un rincón de Killarney; quiero decir que invita a la mirada a soñar.

De Craye movió su dedo en espiral como una corona de humo.

—¿Le gusta el paisaje irlandés?

—Irlandés, inglés, escocés.

—Todos son el mismo en la medida en que son hermosos: sí, habla usted por mí. El cosmopolitismo de las razas es una cuestión distinta. Le pido permiso para dudar de la verdadera unión de algunas de ellas; irlandesa y sajona, por ejemplo: que sea Cupido el maestro de ceremonias y la morada de la feliz pareja en la boca de una cornucopia. Sin embargo, ¡he visto a un caballero sajón llevar orgullosamente una flor de Erin y al de Hibernia cortejando a una Rowena! [35] . Así que deshagamos lo que he dicho y considerémoslo cancelado.

—¿Es usted del partido rebelde, coronel De Craye?

—Soy protestante y conservador, señorita Middleton.

—No tengo cabeza para la política.

—Las cabezas políticas que he visto me tientan a compartir esa opinión.

—¿Ha dicho Willoughby cuando volverá?

—No mencionó una hora en particular. El doctor Middleton y el señor Whitford están en la biblioteca enzarzados en una batalla de libros.

—¡Feliz batalla!

—Usted está acostumbrada a los eruditos. Son más bien intolerantes con nosotros, pobres mortales.

—Con la ignorancia, tal vez; no con las personas.

—Supongo que su padre la educó él mismo.

—Me dio todo el latín que pude asimilar. Es culpa mía que sea poco.

—¿Griego?

—Un poco de griego.

—¡Ah! Lo lleva usted como una pluma.

—Porque es muy ligero.

—Señorita Middleton, podría sentarme para ser instruido, viejo como soy. Cuando las mujeres nos golpean, creo que somos los seres más miserables de la existencia. ¿Le gusta el teatro?

—¿El nuestro?

—Actuar, entonces.

—La buena actuación, desde luego.

—¿Puedo atreverme a decir que actuaría usted admirablemente?

—Es una osadía, porque nunca lo he intentado.

—Déjeme ver; están la señorita Dale y el señor Whitford, usted y yo: suficientes para una pieza en dos actos. *El irlandés en España* estaría bien.

Se inclinó a tocar la hierba por donde ella había pasado.

—El césped está húmedo.

Clara dio a entender que no temía la humedad y dijo:

—Habría que encerrar a las mujeres inglesas que temieran las inclemencias.

De Craye siguió:

—Patrick O'Neill pasa de Hibernia a Iberia, hijo desheredado de un padre en manos de los abogados, con una carta de presentación a don Beltrán de Aragón, Grande de primera clase, que tiene una hija llamada doña Serafina (la señorita Middleton), la belleza más orgullosa del momento, en custodia de una dueña (la señorita Dale) y comprometida con don Fernán, de la familia Guzmán (el señor Whitford). Ahí tiene los *dramatis personae* .

—¿Usted es Patrick?

—El mismo. Y pierdo mi carta y estoy en el Prado de Madrid con el último retrato de Bretaña en la palma de la mano y exclamo con el más puro acento irlandés: Solo porque se ha caído una letra estoy en Iberia en lugar de Hibernia, maldita sea la ortografía.

—Pero seguro que Patrick aspira la letra inicial de Hibernia.

—¡Esa es una crítica aguda, literalmente, señorita Middleton! Así lo haría. Entonces se nos caerían dos letras. Pero lo haría llorando, de manera que no podría contar más que la apariencia de una, y todo seguiría

en escena, puesto que solo es la risa lo que nos hace falta en el umbral de la acción. Además ha de suponer que actuará ante el público de Londres, que mantiene una oposición innata a la aspiración y no soporta que le echen a perder una broma, como si fuera un señor o un policía. Es un instinto de la democracia inglesa. Así que con mi moneda dando vueltas a cara o cruz, suicidio o cena, veo un par de ojos españoles como si fueran rayos de color violeta en los cielos negros de aquel clima favorable. ¿No los tiene usted violeta?

—El violeta prohíbe mi imitación.

—Pero el brillo sobre el negro es un oscuro violeta azulado.

—Recuérdeme que no tengo propensión al negro.

El coronel De Craye se permitió una mirada fugaz a los ojos de la señorita Middleton.

—Castaños —dijo—. Bueno, España es el país de los castaños.

—Entonces se sigue que soy hija de España.

—Claro.

—¡Lógico!

—Una deducción absoluta.

—¿Y cómo he de mirar a Patrick?

—Como se mira a una bestia de carga.

—¡Oh!

La exclamación de la señorita Middleton fue más fuerte de lo que la materia del diálogo parecía requerir. Juntó las manos.

En línea con el otro extremo del rododendro, a la vista de las ventanas de la casa, el joven Crossjay estaba tumbado a su gusto, con la cabeza apoyada en una rama y su sombrero coronado de hiedra sobre la mejilla, justo donde ella lo había dejado pidiéndole que se quedara allí. A medio camino sobre el césped, Clara vio al pobre muchacho y la espuela de la lastimosa vista la empujó rápidamente hacia él. El coronel De Craye la siguió, atusándose el bigote.

Crossjay se puso de pie de un salto.

—¡Mi querido, querido Crossjay! —dijo Clara, dirigiéndose al muchacho en tono de reprobación—. ¡Debes de estar hambriento! ¡Y empapado! ¡Eso está muy mal!

—Usted me pidió que esperase —dijo Crossjay tímidamente en defensa propia.

—Lo hice y no tendrías que haberme hecho caso, ¡bobo! Le dije que me esperase aquí antes de comer, coronel De Craye, y este bobo... No tiene nada para comer y habrá estado empapándose durante dos o tres horas... ¡porque no he venido!

—Muy bien. La lava habría podido cubrirlo y convertirlo en molde, como al centinela de Pompeya, si es de auténtica cepa.

—Puede haberse resfriado, tener fiebre.

—Sus órdenes fueron que se quedase ahí.

—Lo sé y no puedo perdonármelo. Corre, Crossjay, y cámbiate de ropa. ¡Oh! Corre a la señora Montague y dile que te prepare un baño caliente y dile de mi parte que te dé algo de cenar. Cámbiate toda la ropa. Es imperdonable por mi parte. Dije que no tengo cabeza para la política. Empiezo a pensar que no la tengo para nada. Pero ¿cómo podía imaginar que Crossjay no se movería con la campana y toda la lluvia? Me había olvidado de ti, Crossjay. ¡Lo siento mucho, lo siento mucho! Puedes ponerme el castigo que quieras. Recuerda que estoy profundamente en deuda contigo. Ahora déjame ver cómo sales corriendo. Has de venir a los postres esta noche.

Crossjay no salió corriendo. Le cogió la mano.

—Usted dijo algo.

—¿Qué dije, Crossjay?

—Lo prometió.

—¿Qué prometí?

—Algo.

—Dilo, querido muchacho.

Crossjay balbuceó:

—... besarme.

Clara se desplomó sobre él, lo rodeó y lo besó.

El impulso afectuosamente lleno de remordimiento fue demasiado rápido para una nota convencional de advertencia que le impidiera pagar esa parte de su deuda. Cuando lo hubo enviado a la señora Montague, estaba ruborizada.

—Querido, querido Crossjay.

—Sí, es un buen muchacho —observó el coronel—. Podría ser un soldado fiel en su puesto si recibiera la promesa de semejante paga. Es su gran favorito.

—Lo es. Le haría usted un gran servicio si persuadiera a Willoughby para que lo enviara con uno de esos hombres que preparan a los muchachos para los exámenes de la marina. Coronel De Craye, ¿será usted tan amable de pedirle en la cena que Crossjay pueda venir a los postres?

—Desde luego —dijo él, asombrado.

—¿Lo cuidará mientras esté aquí? Mire que nadie lo eche a perder. Si puede lograr que salga de aquí antes de irse usted será de gran provecho para él. Ha nacido para la marina y debería estar preparándose para entrar en ella.

—Desde luego, desde luego —dijo De Craye, aún más asombrado.

—Le doy las gracias por anticipado.

—¿No estaré usurpando...?

—No, nos vamos mañana.

—¿Por un día?

—Por más tiempo.

—¿Dos?

—Será más.

—¿Una semana? ¿No volveré a verla?

—Me temo que no.

El coronel De Craye dominó su sorpresa; mitigó una sensación de verdadero dolor y dijo amablemente:

—Es un golpe, pero estoy seguro de que no ha querido darlo. Nos duele a todos.

La señorita Middleton dijo algo sobre la señora Montague, el ama de llaves, en referencia al baño de Crossjay, y abandonó el césped. El coronel se inclinó, la contempló un momento y, por razones paralelas, apresurándose a batir la marca, se compadeció de su amigo Willoughby. Ganar o perder a aquella joven le pareció algo igual de lamentable para Willoughby.

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33 John Milton, *Paraíso perdido,* I, 222-224. La cita completa es esta: «This the seat / That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom / For that celestial light?» (¿Es este el lugar que hemos de cambiar por el cielo, esta triste melancolía por aquella luz celestial?).

34 Petronio, *Satiricón,* 56.

35 Lady Rowena es la noble sajona por antonomasia en *Ivanhoe* de Walter Scott.

XX

Un gran vino añejo

El ocioso paseo arriba y abajo por el césped con las señoras y los deferentes caballeros, antes de la campana de la cena, era el placer vespertino del doctor Middleton. Caminaba como quien antes hubiera bailado (en la época de Apolo y el joven dios Cupido), con los músculos de la pantorrilla y los pies elásticos y la amplia cabeza de gris metálico bien alta. La dura labor del día permitía el refrescante ejercicio y los refrigerios de la cocina francesa y los vinos de buenas cosechas. Era feliz a esa hora dispensando sabiduría o *nugae* a sus oyentes, como el sol poniente, cuyo hábito, cuando se le trata bien, es el de estallar en tranquilos esplendores que en modo alguno agotan su tesoro. Más dichoso que sus semejantes, por la altura del ave de alas extendidas en una hermosa tarde por encima del gorrión que picotea, es aquel que, en las recurrentes tardes de sus días, ve lo mejor por delante y próximo a llegar. Tiene la recompensa de una juventud y una madurez de vida virtuosa. El doctor Middleton dudaba del futuro tanto como del pasado del hombre que, al volverse grave, no se mostraba exultante a la hora de cenar. Consideraba a ese hombre inadecuado para este mundo y para el mundo por venir.

Ejemplo de los buenos frutos de la moderación, sentía un grato orgullo por su digestión y sus sentimientos políticos eran acordes a su veneración de los poderes que recompensan la virtud. Hemos de tener un mundo estable donde eso pueda darse.

El reverendo doctor era una hermosa pintura antigua, un espécimen peculiarmente inglés, que combinaba en sí mismo la piedad y el epicureísmo, la erudición y la caballerosidad, con un buen espacio para cada una de ellos y un asiento respectivo en la mesa de ambos; por lo demás, era fuerte, había sido atleta en su juventud, lector agudo de los hechos, pero no de las personas, afable, un gigante en la tarea, un firme trabajador, pero fácil de descomponer. Amaba a su hija y la temía. Aunque le gustaba su carácter, el temor de su sexo y edad estaba presente constantemente para advertirle que no estaba vinculado a la salud perfecta mientras la jovencita Clara siguiera soltera. Su madre había sido una mujer amable, aunque de temperamento poético, demasiado entusiasta, imaginativa, impulsiva para el reposo de un sobrio erudito; una mujer admirable, sin embargo; una mujer, como sabemos, de fuegos artificiales. La muchacha se le parecía. ¿Por qué querría marcharse corriendo de Patterne Hall por una sola hora? Simplemente porque era de sexo mudable y explosivo. Un marido era el custodio adecuado para aliviar a un padre. Con demagogos en el extranjero e hijas en casa, hace falta la filosofía para mantenernos en pie. Que la muchacha sea la Tulia de Cicerón: pero ¡muere! La más escogida de todas nos proporcionará ejemplos de una extraña perversidad.

La señorita Dale estaba junto al doctor Middleton. Clara se acercó a ellos y se puso al otro lado.

—Le estaba contando a la señorita Dale que la señal de tu sujeción es mi franquía —le dijo, suspirando y sonriendo—. Sabemos la fecha. La fecha de un acontecimiento por venir lo certifica como un hecho con el que hay que contar.

—¿Estás ansioso por perderme? —titubeó Clara.

—Querida mía, me has plantado en un campo donde espero la trompeta y, cuando sople, me sacará de quicio, nada más.

Clara no encontró la manera de replicar a esas palabras. Pensó en el silencio de Leticia.

Sir Willoughby entró, aparentando un humor cordial.

—No necesito preguntar si estás mejor —le dijo a Clara, alegrándose de ver a Leticia y elevando una llave a la altura del pecho del doctor Middleton, señalando que iba a su «bodega interior».

—¡Una bodega interior! —exclamó el doctor.

—Intocable para el mayordomo. Prohibida para el encargado de mantenimiento. ¿Puedo servirle de guía? Mis bodegas merecen una visita.

—Las bodegas no son catacumbas. Bien construidas, bien consideradas, son claustros donde la botella medita en los goces que proporcionará, ¡sin que el polvo las eche a perder! ¿Tiene algo grande?

—Un vino de noventa años.

—¿Asociado a su pedigrí de modo que pronuncie la edad con tanto aplomo?

—Lo heredó mi abuelo.

—Su abuelo, sir Willoughby, tuvo una descendencia meritoria, por no hablar de sus generosos progenitores. ¿Qué habría ocurrido si hubiera caído en la línea femenina? Me alegrará acompañarle. ¿Oporto? ¿Hermitage?

—Oporto.

—¡Ah! ¡Estamos en Inglaterra!

—Ya era hora —dijo sir Willoughby, invitando al doctor Middleton a salir.

El tono del reverendo doctor era exultante.

—También el vino del Rin envejece bien. He probado los antiguos vinos del Rin. Su sabor es como un arroyo de muchas voces; también tienen profundidad. ¡Oporto senatorial!, decimos. No podemos decir eso de ningún otro vino. Reside en su profundo sabor, marca la diferencia. Es como una tragedia clásica, orgánica en su concepción. Un viejo Hermitage tiene la luz de la antigüedad, el mérito de envejecer hasta una extrema edad; un mérito. Ni del Hermitage ni del Rin podríamos decir que es la sangre de aquellos largos años que conserva la fuerza de juventud con la sabiduría de la vejez. ¡El oporto! ¡El oporto es nuestro legado más noble! Fíjese en que no comparo los vinos; distingo las cualidades. Que convivan para nuestro enriquecimiento; no son rivales como las tres Gracias. Si fueran rivales, un cuarto los desafiaría. El borgoña tiene genio. Su periodo es asombroso; logra todo excepto mantenernos en la carrera; es de corta vida. Un viejo Borgoña compite con un bisoño oporto. Acaricio la fantasía de que el oporto pronuncia las frases de la sabiduría mientras el borgoña canta la oda inspirada. O digamos que el oporto es el hexámetro homérico y el borgoña el ditirambo pindárico. ¿Qué dice usted?

—La comparación es excelente, señor.

—La distinción, querrá decir. Píndaro asombra, pero su antecesor nos entrega la copa más sustanciosa. Uno es una fuente de ascenso prodigioso. El otro es la púrpura insondable de las nubes que pasan.

—Una distinción muy hermosa.

—Imagino que está elogiando los símiles. Pertenecen a la época de los primeros críticos de esos poetas. Toquemos a los griegos y ya no podremos tocar nada nuevo; todo se ha dicho ya: *Graiis... praeter laudem, nullius avaris* [36] . El genio dedicado a la fama es inmortal. Nosotros, señor, dedicamos el genio a fluidos de cloaca. No nos dirigimos a los dioses inolvidables, sino al estómago popular.

Sir Willoughby era paciente. Se había emparejado con el doctor Middleton en el discurso como un tambor a una viola y, cuando golpeaba, recibía una corrección del instrumento pedagógico. Si golpeaba más fuerte se equivocaba. Sin embargo, sabía que los eruditos son una especie sin modales y la erudición del doctor era un tema sobre el que dilatarse.

En la bodega fue el turno del tambor. El doctor Middleton se mordió la lengua allí. Sir Willoughby dio la historia de su vino en encabezamientos de capítulos, de donde pasó a la familia original y cómo había llegado hasta él en la cantidad que iban a ver.

—Curiosamente, mi abuelo, que la heredó, solo bebía agua. Mi padre murió joven.

—¿De verdad? ¡Querido! —exclamó el doctor con asombro y condolencia. Lo primero se dirigía a la contrariedad del hombre, lo segundo comprendía su melancólico destino.

La familia lo había impresionado. Esa fría bodega abovedada, y el cubo central, o *enceinte,* en cuya espesa oscuridad no penetraba la intrusa lámpara, que parecía un ojo, testificaba la firme solidez práctica del hombre que la había edificado con esos cimientos. Una casa que tiene un gran vino almacenado debajo vive en nuestra imaginación como una casa jovial fija y espléndidamente arraigada en el suelo, y la imaginación tiene un lugar para el heredero de la casa. Su abuelo bebedor de agua, su padre muerto joven, nos presentan las circunstancias como si se tratara de una predestinación de un ilustre heredero y su carrera. La amable visión de vasos del gran vino coloreaba las cavilaciones del doctor Middleton, que estaba de un humor festivo; le complacía y decidió consentirse su estilo de pensamiento caprichoso y robusto, grandioso y liviano, del que la mente festiva toma a veces una impronta que no podemos olvidar inmediatamente. La expectación es grata, como sabemos; en el modo de la gratitud somos de cera y él era un caballero de humor propio.

Le gustó el tono de sir Willoughby al ordenarle al sirviente que los seguía que tomara «esas dos botellas», lo que prescribía, sin exagerar, una adecuada cautela y mencionaba un número agradable.

Mirando fijamente la mano del hombre, dijo:

—Esta es la desgracia de una cosa que supera lo excelente: no más de uno entre veinte le hará justicia.

Sir Willoughby respondió:

—Muy cierto, señor, y creo que nosotros podemos pasar por delante de los diecinueve.

—Las mujeres, por ejemplo, y la mayoría de los hombres.

—Este vino sería un libro sellado para ellos.

—Creo que lo sería. Sería una pérdida gravosa.

—Vernon es hombre de Burdeos y también lo es Horace De Craye. Los dos están por debajo de la marca de este vino. Se unirán a las señoras. Tal vez usted y yo, señor, podríamos seguir juntos.

—Con toda mi buena voluntad por mi parte.

—Estoy ansioso por conocer su veredicto.

—Lo tendrá, señor, aunque puedo predecir que no en armonía con el coro que me precede. Frío, no frígido.

El doctor Middleton resumió los atributos de la bodega al salir:

—Lado norte y sur. Sin humedad. ¡Aire puro! Todo lo necesario. Podríamos tumbarnos y mantenernos dulcemente aquí.

De todos nuestros venerables británicos en las dos islas que profesan una adhesión lactante a un viejo vino de oporto, abogado, doctor, caballero, sonrosado almirante, comerciante de la ciudad, el erudito clásico es aquel cuya sangre es más nupcial con la botella palmeada. La razón debe de ser que está lleno de viejos poetas. Cuenta con su espíritu para cantar y con lo mejor que el tiempo ha hecho sobre la tierra para alimentarlo. Puede percibir también un parecido en el vino con el estudioso, que es lo contrario de nuestra mortalidad y arroja ácidos y partículas al montón de los años, hasta que brilla por la claridad. El oporto es un himno a su conservadurismo. Es mágico: con un sorbo nada en la corriente púrpura de la antigüedad siempre joven.

Por comparación, el gozo de los demás es brutal; no tienen alma para él; pero el erudito es digno del vino, como los poetas de la belleza. En realidad, habrían de separarse, erudito y poeta, para lo bueno que hay en el erudito. Sea así.

El doctor Middleton tomó un sorbo.

Tras la salida de las señoras, sir Willoughby había sido deliberadamente brusco con Vernon y Horacio.

—Tomaréis Burdeos —les dijo al pasar—. Oporto, supongo, doctor Middleton. El vino delante de usted podría servir de prefacio. Tendremos su vino en cinco minutos.

Vacía la jarra de Burdeos, sir Willoughby se ofreció a enviar por más. De Craye estaba intrigado. Vernon se levantó de la mesa.

—Tenemos una botella del oporto del doctor Middleton al llegar —le dijo Willoughby.

—¿Ha dicho mía? —exclamó el reverendo doctor.

—Es un vino regio, que no tolera ser compartido —dijo Vernon.

—Estaremos contigo si vas a la sala de billar, Vernon.

—No apuraré mi buen vino por nadie —dijo el reverendo doctor.

—¿Horacio?

—Yo estoy por debajo, soy efímero, Willoughby. Me voy con las señoras.

Vernon y De Craye se retiraron al llegar el vino y el doctor Middleton sorbió. Sorbió y miró al propietario.

—¿Treinta docenas?

—Cincuenta.

El doctor asintió humildemente.

—Le recordaré, señor —su anfitrión se dirigió a él—, cuando tenga el honor de albergarle, que soy el bodeguero de ese vino.

El reverendo doctor se fijó las gafas.

—La suya, señor, en cierto sentido, es una posición envidiable. Es una posición responsable, aunque una bendición. De usted depende retrasar el día de la última docena.

—¿Su opinión del vino es favorable, señor?

—Diré esto: las almas superficiales se apresuran a la rapsodia; diré que este vaso de su vino ancestral me consuela de no haber vivido hace noventa años o en ningún otro periodo salvo el presente.

—Soy cuidadoso con él —dijo modestamente sir Willoughby—, aunque su destino natural sea aquellos que saben apreciarlo. Usted lo hace, señor.

—¡Aunque, aunque, mi buen amigo...! Es una obligación, es una posesión, parte en fideicomiso. Aunque no podamos afirmar que sea una implicación, nuestras conciencias están en cierto modo comprometidas con que la sucesión no se vea considerablemente disminuida.

—No tendrá objeción a beber, señor, a la salud de sus nietos. ¡Y que viva usted para brindar por ellos en el día de su boda!

—Usted pinta la idea de una existencia prolongada con tintes seductores. ¡Ja! Es un vino para Titón. Este vino lo haría correr hacia la Aurora de rosáceos dedos... ¡Ajá!

—Cuidaré de que permanezca usted sentado hasta la aurora —dijo sir Willoughby, inocente de la nupcialidad báquica de la alusión.

El doctor Middleton miró de reojo el decantador. Hay pesar en la alegría debido a la premonición de nuestro estado mortal. La cantidad de vino en el decantador no prometía sostener la bóveda estrellada y saludar el amanecer.

—¡El vino añejo, amigo mío, nos niega la botella entera!

—Le seguirá otra.

—¡No!

—Ya la he pedido.

—Protesto.

—Está descorchada.

—Suplico.

—Está decantado.

—Me someto. Pero advierta que hemos de compartirlo honestamente. Usted es mi digno anfitrión con esa estipulación. ¡Fíjese en la superioridad del vino respecto a Venus! Podría decir la magnanimidad del vino. ¡Nos mostramos celosos de quien no lo comparte! Pero los corchos, Willoughby, los corchos excitan mi asombro.

—El corcho es examinado a intervalos regulares. Lo recuerdo de la época de mi padre. Lo he visto una vez.

—Debe de ser tan peligroso como una traqueotomía, que supongo depende de la habilidad quirúrgica y la firmeza de la mano, por no mencionar el carraspeo del paciente.

Delante del doctor se puso un decantador nuevo.

Dijo:

—¡Solo tengo una hija que dar!

Se derretía.

Sir Willoughby contestó:

—La tomo como el premio más alto que este mundo ofrezca.

—Le he puesto algo de latín en la cabeza y una nota de griego. Tiene un gusto clásico. Espero que alguna vez... Pero es una chiquilla. La ninfa de los bosques está en ella. Le entregará su copa de flores de Hipocrene. Tiene esa aristocracia: la más noble. Es hermosa; una belleza, dicen algunos, que no se juzga por las líneas. ¡Hermosa para mí, Willoughby! Es mi cielo. Ha tenido pretendientes. En Italia suplicaron por ella. No tiene historia. Usted es el primer encabezamiento del capítulo. Con usted ella tendrá su único cuento, como debe ser. *Mulier tum bene olet,* ya sabe. La más fragante es la que no huele a nada. Le llega a usted de mis manos, del padre a su marido. *Ut flos in septis secretus nascitur hortis* ... Murmuró las líneas hasta *Sic virgo, dum* [37] ... Sentirá su marcha. Se va con alguien que tendrá mi orgullo por ella y más. Añadiré que será envidiado. El señor Whitford debe escribir para usted un *Carmen nuptiale* .

El corazón del desgraciado caballero que escuchaba al doctor Middleton latió irregularmente. Su ánimo ofendido se rompió con la imagen de Clara, que se le revelaba como la había visto por la mañana junto a Horacio De Craye, angustiosamente dulce, dulce con la brisa radiante de un suave día inglés, dulce con la aspereza de la savia joven. Sus ojos, sus labios, su vestido rozagante que se abombaba sobre su seno, insinuando sus pechos velados, y su risa, su esbelta figura, su porte incomparable: toda su terrible dulzura que hurgaba en su herida.

El deseo de Clara de quedar libre de él lo angustiaba. Era sincero en su dolor. Cuando el dolor era más llevadero se consolaba con la idea de sus celos de Leticia Dale y consideraba aquel deseo una ficción. Pero ella lo había formulado. Esa era la herida que tenía que curar por la doble razón de que podría amarla más después de castigarla y de que meditar en el castigo enmascaraba el temor de perderla, el terrible abismo ante el que ella había logrado que su naturaleza se estremeciera como ante un borde vertiginoso posiblemente cercano, a pesar de su capacidad de defensa propia.

—¿Qué haré mañana por la tarde? —exclamó—. No me importa lanzarles una botella al coronel De Craye y a Vernon. No puedo abrir una para mí. Sentarme con las señoras será como sentarme a la intemperie. ¿Cuándo me devolverá a mi prometida, señor?

—¡Mi querido Willoughby!

El reverendo doctor resopló, se compuso y sorbió.

—La marcha es absurda. No soy capaz de ver su propósito. Le duele la cabeza, vapores. Se le ha pasado y recobrará el buen sentido. Siempre he mantenido que no ha de alentarse el sinsentido en las muchachas. Puedo apoyarme en eso. Mi disposición es la de quedarme aquí diez días, en los términos de su hospitalaria invitación, y me quedo.

—Aplaudo su decisión, señor. ¿Será firme?

—No finjo mis compromisos, Willoughby.

—¿Tampoco bajo presión?

—Bajo ninguna presión.

—Tendría que haber dicho persuasión.

—Desde luego que no. La debilidad reside en ceder, ya sea a la persuasión o a la presión. La presión nos da un peso que soportar; la persuasión nos derriba por nuestra falta de peso.

—Es gratificante, doctor Middleton, y me alivia.

—Me disgusta mucho que se alteren los buenos hábitos, Willoughby. Pero recuerdo, ¿me equivoco?, haberle dicho a Clara que usted parecía de buen ánimo en relación con una marcha, o la interrupción de una visita, lo cual, debo confesarlo, no era de mi gusto.

—Simplemente, mi querido doctor, su placer es mi placer; haga suyo el mío y quédese a vaciar muchas botellas con su yerno.

—Muy bien dicho. Tiene usted un discurso cortés, Willoughby. Imagino que podrá usted manejar una riña de enamorados con un refinamiento que sea una lección para una muchachita mimada. ¡Ajá!

—Ahórreme la futilidad de la riña.

—¿Todo está bien?

—Clara —respondió sir Willoughby con un dramático epigrama— es la perfección.

—Me alegro —dijo el reverendo doctor, dándose por enterado de que la riña de enamorados entre su hija y su anfitrión había terminado.

Dejó la mesa poco después de las once. Había seguido un diálogo sobre las señoras. ¿Se habrían ido a la cama? Sí, desde luego. Es bueno que se vayan pronto a la cama para conservar su tez para nosotros. Las damas son la gloria de la creación, pero un anticlímax después de un vino de cien años. Son un anticlímax, un retroceso, una contracorriente; moralmente son arrepentimiento, penitencia; en la imaginación, el helado norte sobre los capullos que verdean. ¿Qué saben ellas de un crítico del paladar y de un cuerpo que es todo fiesta? Observemos que es una fiesta sobria, la limitación en la exaltación: la fiesta clásica. ¿Podrían ellas, por queridas que sean para nosotros, encender candelabros en la mente, iluminar toda la historia y resolver el secreto del destino del hombre? No pueden; no pueden simpatizar con los que pueden. En consecuencia, hay esa división entre nosotros; pero no somos orientales con turbante ni ellas viven en un harén. No somos musulmanes. Podemos estar seguros de eso al contemplar el decantador en la mesa.

El doctor Middleton dijo:

—Me voy directamente a la cama.

—Le acompaño hasta la puerta, señor —dijo su anfitrión.

Se oyó el piano. El doctor Middleton se apoyó en la baranda y observó:

—¿Se habrán ido las señoras a la cama?

Vernon salió de la biblioteca y le saludó:

—¡Compañero de estudios!

Le dio las buenas noches al doctor y le dijo a Willoughby:

—Las señoras están en el salón.

—Estoy subiendo las escaleras —fue la respuesta.

—¡La soledad y el sueño, después de un vino como ese, nos previenen de la compañía humana! —exclamó el doctor—. Pero ¡Willoughby!

—Señor.

—*Una* mañana.

—Dispone de la bodega, señor.

—Estoy dispuesto a dirigir los caballos al sol. Aconsejaría estrictamente una y no más. Hemos hecho un roto en la quincuagésima docena. Una al día nos preservará de numerar la cuadragésima de una manera intempestiva. Un par de botellas *per diem* pronostica desintegración, con el atolondramiento como compañero. Constitucionalmente, déjeme añadir, soporto tres. Hablo para la posteridad.

Durante la alocución del doctor Middleton las señoras salieron del salón, con Clara a la cabeza, pues había oído la voz de su padre y quería preguntarle en referencia a su marcha:

—Papá, ¿me dirás la hora mañana?

Subió corriendo las escaleras a besarlo y volvió a decirle:

—¿Cuándo estarás listo mañana por la mañana?

El doctor Middleton se mostró deliberadamente tenaz en la nota aflautada de un repetido ejem. Pensó en responder con su lengua doctoral. La disposición del rostro de Clara le aconsejaba ser breve: empezaba a tener hambre. Entrometiéndose en su visión de las huríes tumbadas en la bodega para recompensa de los valientes, lo enojó. Frunció las cejas. Dijo:

—No estaré listo mañana por la mañana.

—¿Por la tarde?

—Tampoco por la tarde.

—¿Cuándo?

—Querida mía, estoy listo para irme a la cama en este momento y no estoy listo para nada más. Señoras —se inclinó ante el grupo en el vestíbulo—, mis hermosos sueños las cortejarán esta noche.

Sir Willoughby había bajado rápidamente y chocado las manos de las señoras, indicándole a Horacio De Craye el laboratorio para fumar, y volvió con el doctor Middleton. Vejado por la escena, inseguro de sí mis-

mo si se quedaba con Clara, para quien había dispuesto que su decepción tendría lugar por la mañana, en su ausencia, le dijo «Buenas noches, buenas noches» con el debido fervor, inclinándose sobre las flácidas puntas de sus dedos. Luego le ofreció su brazo al reverendo doctor.

—Ay hijo Willoughby, amistosamente, si usted quiere, aunque soy hombre que lleva su carga —le dijo el padre de la estupefacta muchacha—. Las velas, creo, están en el primer rellano. Buenas noches, amor mío, Clara.

—¡Papá!

—Buenas noches.

—¡Oh! —dijo, elevando el pecho con la interjección, avergonzada de la conspiración de cortina, y añadió:

—Buenas noches.

Su padre subió las escaleras. Ella las bajó.

—El supuesto era que papá y yo nos iríamos a Londres mañana temprano —dijo despreocupadamente a las señoras, y su voz fue clara, pero su rostro era demasiado legible. De Craye se sintió profundamente infeliz al verlo.

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36 Horacio, *Arte poética,* 323-324: «A los griegos, de nada más codiciosos que de la alabanza».

37 Catulo, *Epitalamio:* «Como flor hermosa que en jardín cerrado... Así la doncella».

XXI

Las meditaciones de Clara

HUBO dos insomnes esa noche: la señorita Middleton y el coronel De Craye.

Clara tenía fiebre, yacente como una piedra, con el cerebro ardiéndole. Las naturalezas dispuestas se precipitan en la calamidad con cualquier sombra que les arroje por delante. Un terror aprensivo las empuja. No se detienen en el límite cuando están en alas del pavor. Un ceño fruncido significa tempestad, un viento naufragio; ver el fuego es quedar atrapado por él. Cuando lo que temen es la cercanía de su aversión, la tragedia es abrazarlo enseguida, y luego sigue la lucha entre ellas mismas y el horror, entre ellas mismas y el mal, que promete ayuda; entre ellas mismas y la debilidad, que convoca al mal; entre ellas mismas y la mejor parte de ellas mismas, que no susurra engaño.

El falso rumbo de sofisticada cobardía que había tomado aterrorizó a la muchacha; estaba perdida. La ventaja que Willoughby le había sacado adquirió la forma de la fortaleza y la hizo sentirse abyecta, reptil; estaba perdida y era arrastrada por la corriente hacia una catarata. Había ganado a su padre como aliado. Extrañamente, no sabía cómo, Willoughby había tenido éxito en influir en su padre, que hasta entonces no había hecho más que tolerarlo. «Hijo Willoughby» en los labios de su padre significaba algo con lo que escena tras escena habría que luchar, hasta que fuera más persistente que su padre y ella misma. Se revolvió contra el «Hijo Willoughby» con estupefacción, desprecio, rebelión y sometimiento. Significaba que había sido vencida. Significaba que había perdido la estima de su padre. Lo vio en una gigantesca imagen de descomposición.

Reconocer su cobarde debilidad la llevó a rumiar el fatalismo. ¿Qué derecho tenía una criatura tan miserable como ella a suscitar tanta turbación, fuera buena o mala su fortuna? Era más sencillo dejarse llevar, más amable para todos. ¡Gracias al cielo por las oportunidades de una vida breve! Una vez en la red, la desesperación carece de gracia. Podríamos ser bestias en nuestro destino terrenal; para soportarlo no hace falta que lo seamos.

Ahora se encontraba en la opulencia de la pasividad, cuando arrojamos nuestra carga a los poderes superiores y dejamos de amarlos. La necesidad de amarlos la sacó de ahí de modo que se enfrentara a lo insoportable y, mediante un esfuerzo puro, aunque careciera de gracia, llegara a amarlos humildemente. Es ahí donde la semilla de una buena educación le da apoyo al alma, pues la condición puede cartografiarse y, donde el destino nos susurra que cerremos los ojos, y la instrucción nos pide que miremos hacia arriba, hay una encrucijada bien marcada de la lucha.

De sensación ágil, pero falta de coraje, se dio cuenta de la torpeza con la que había obrado. Como castigo, le pareció que quien no se conozca a sí mismo debe aprender a conquistar su naturaleza y someterse. Había aceptado a Willoughby; en consecuencia lo aceptó. El hecho se convirtió en una cuestión del pasado, sin discusión.

En abstracto, esa contemplación de las circunstancias fue bien. Un sencillo deber la esperaba. Entonces, un pensamiento desencarnado la rodeó, comparándola con Vernon para su propio descrédito. Vernon había soportado durante años muchas cosas que no eran de su gusto, con el propósito de estudiar, y ayudado con sus pobres ingresos a quienes aún eran más pobres. Pensó en él con compasión y envidia; había vivido en este lugar y eso debía hacer ella; la modestia de Vernon no lo había deshonrado ni había perdido el dominio de sí mismo, porque tenía una vida en su interior. Clara casi llegó a imaginar que podría imitarlo cuando el golpe de un agudo pensamiento físico —«¡La diferencia! ¡La diferencia!»— le dijo que ella era una mujer y no podría someterse. ¿Puede una mujer tener una vida interior aparte de la de aquel a la que está subyugada? Trató de recogerse en sí misma, en algún rincón donde la perspectiva abstracta la había consolado, para no pensar como su sangre femenina la obligaba a pensar. Fue en vano. La diferencia, el hado cruel, la indefensión de las mujeres, la perseguía, atada a la grupa de caballos salvajes, empujada a vastos desiertos. En su caso el deber era vergüenza; por ello no podía ser deber en términos generales. La diferencia intolerable proscribía la palabra.

Pero el fuego del cerebro ardía y lo iluminaba todo, la iluminaba a ella contra sí misma. ¿Tenía una persona tan veleidosa como ella voluntad? ¿No era lo que tomaba por voluntad una multitud de deseos tornadizos? ¿Era ella, una cabeza de chorlito, alguien que pudiera apoyarse en el orgullo físico? Si podía entregar irreflexivamente su mano (como concebía haber hecho por la incapacidad de concebir que lo hubiera hecho reflexivamente), ¿era mucho mejor que una mercancía a la venta que nada tenía que decir en el trato?

Además, decía su incandescente razón, ella no había sospechado esa astucia en Willoughby. ¿No se había engañado por completo, no lo había malinterpretado? Más fuerte de lo que había imaginado, ¿no sería también más estimable? El mundo lo favorecía: sus amigos lo apreciaban.

Clara volvió a examinarlo. Era de una sola pieza. No era mucho menos favorable intencionadamente que en el examen del mundo y de sus amigos, pero, empezando por la idea que todos ellos tenían, Clara recordó, oyó la voz de Willoughby al dar su opinión de sus amigos y del mundo, de Vernon Whitford y del coronel De Craye, por ejemplo, y de los hombres y las mujeres. Un acuerdo indefinido en tener la misma consideración por él que tenían sus amigos y el mundo, en el supuesto de que se mantuviera a la misma distancia de ella, fue el final de esa fase, que la ocupó durante un minuto y al que llegó a través de una serie de imágenes intensamente vívidas: el rostro de Willoughby cuando le pidió que la liberase era su trasfondo y comentario.

«¡No puedo! ¡No puedo!», gritó en voz alta, lo que la hizo ver que su repulsión era una advertencia sagrada. Era mejor ser desgraciada que una esposa aborrecida; era mejor parecer incoherente. ¿Por qué no había de parecer como era?

¿Por qué? Solemos contestar a esa pregunta apoyándonos de mala gana en ciertas cualidades soberbias, hermosas cualidades dañadas de nosotros mismos que el mundo no ha descubierto, no mucho más de lo que nosotros sospechábamos que las teníamos, en las que sigue residiendo nuestra fortaleza, donde el orgullo campa a sus anchas, solitario e insensible como un conservador octogenario. Pero no es posible responder así cuando el cerebro rabia como una tea y la iluminación voraz no deja un solo lugar de nuestra naturaleza a salvo. El aspecto de su debilidad era absoluto y la devolvía atemorizada al motivo de su aversión. De su aversión, tan pronto como sus sensaciones la estimulaban a darse cuenta, era arrastrada a su debilidad. Era desgraciada, incoherente, veleidosa, falta de principios, peor que una presa de la maldad: era capaz de ella. Solo esperaba estar equivocada. La idea de equivocarse le infundió languidez, pues entonces la batalla habría terminado y ella sería un alga feliz en el mar, libre de tirones en las raíces, dejando que el mar la elevase y sostuviese. Sería entonces como Constanza: como ella en su fortuna, no tan valiente, temía.

¡Tal vez muy parecida a Constanza en su fortuna!

Los pobres cuerpos turbados que se despiertan en medio de la noche para contemplar visualmente el espectro arrojado por la perpleja maquinaria de su interior lo miran a distancia, hasta alcanzar la conciencia que han sepultado bajo las sábanas con la alacridad de un pez.

Clara contempló su pensamiento y se hundió de repente en un golfo de rubor.

Había sido absuelta o logrado el olvido. Tras desplomarse, el primer objeto de su meditación fue el coronel De Craye. Pensó tranquilamente en él: parecía un refugio. Era muy guapo, un carácter festivo. Su figura flexible, sin otro apoyo que sí mismo, su expresión de inteligencia ágil y su disposición a la travesura, su agradable humor, temperamento cordial y su condición de irlandés, en la que se sentía con libertad para interpretar como si lo hiciera con el harpa, emblema de la isla, eran gratos al pensamiento. Apartó la sospecha de que estuviera haciendo trampas con esa tranquila observación. Escapando a la tortura, su naturaleza joven eludía el cerebro ardiente en busca de aire fresco y se complacía en una fiesta al tenerlo en cuenta: ¡era un aguacero en una tierra sedienta! Ampliada la perspectiva, Clara no tenía motivos para suponer que no fuera un buen hombre: podía pensar en él con seguridad. Además estaba obligado por su futuro oficio en apoyo de su amigo Willoughby a ser inofensivo. Además (no esperemos secuencias lógicas), esa lluvia refrescante al pensar en él era una especie de garantía de que, cuanto más lo hiciera, menos probable sería que su figura fuera la de un oficial aborrecible, es decir, la del hombre que haría por Willoughby ante el altar lo que su padre, supuestamente, haría por ella. La mente de Clara encontró descanso en el coronel De Craye.

Su nombre era Horacio. El padre de Clara había trabajado con ella en Horacio. Conocía la mayoría de las odas y algunas de las sátiras y epístolas del poeta. Reflejaban rayos benevolentes sobre el caballero con nombre de poeta. También él era vivaz, divertido, con sentido común, elegancia; amaba lo rústico, decía, suspiraba por la vida en el campo, se imaginaba retirándose a Canadá a cultivar su propio terreno. *Modus agri non ita magnus:* una delicia [38] . Y, también él, cuando estaba en el campo, suspiraba por la ciudad. Había un fuerte parecido. Hacía de no ser rico un motivo de diversión. *Quae virtus et quanta sit vivere parvo.* Pero esa cita se aplicaba y pertenecía a Vernon Whitford. Ni siquiera algo tan pequeño alteró sus meditaciones [39] .

Habría pensado en Vernon, como su instinto de seguridad le recomendaba, si sus exigencias no hubieran sido excesivas. Se propuso ayudarla solo con su consejo. Ella tenía que hacerlo todo por sí misma; hacerlo y atreverse a todo, decidirlo todo. Le dijo llanamente que así aprendería a conocerse y llanamente que esa sería su pena. Clara no había ganado nada rompiéndose y derramándose ante él. Vernon la habría puesto cara a cara con Willoughby y su padre y habría sido testigo de la entrevista: ella misma habría sido el tema. ¿Qué alternativa había? Se había comprometido a cumplir su palabra. Vernon habló de paciencia, de examinarse a sí misma y de paciencia. Pero todo en ella tenía la marca de *urgente* . Esa casa era una jaula y

el mundo... Su cerebro era una jaula hasta que ella obtuviera la perspectiva de su libertad.

En cuanto a la casa, podía dejarla; empezaba a amanecer.

Fue a la ventana a mirar el primer asomo de color en el gris. Obtuvo una pequeña satisfacción al verlo o al verse a sí misma. Evitó el cristal y el cielo. Uno y otro la estampaban como una esclava en un marco. Le pareció que había estado tanto tiempo en este lugar que había sido fijada a él: era su mundo e imaginar los Alpes era como tratar de volver a la infancia. A menos que sucediera un milagro, tendría que pasar aquí sus días. Los hombres son tan poco caballerosos que no hay milagros. Estaba condenada.

Tomó una pluma y empezó a escribirle a una amiga querida, Lucy Darleton, que iba a ser su dama de honor, para revocar las órdenes de su vestido nupcial y proponerle un viaje a Suiza. Habló del país montañoso abandonándose a la imaginación. Se convirtió en un resquicio visionario de huida. Se levantó y se puso un chal sobre su vestido de noche para no quedarse helada y, al volver a la mesa, no pudo seguir escribiendo. Las líneas que había escrito fueron desechadas: eran ridículamente ineficaces. Rompió en pedazos la carta. Estaba completamente condenada.

Se puso a llorar al ver los pedazos y luego se vistió y se sentó junto a la ventana a ver el mirlo en la hierba saltando sobre las hojas de hierba cubiertas de rocío e iluminadas por el sol hasta la sombra de los árboles y pensando que el rocío en las zonas oscuras es más significativo y su belleza más dulce que la del rocío en el césped. Solo significaba que estaba más tranquila. Había atravesado su crisis anticipándose a ella. Así es como las naturalezas dispuestas son más frías o duras, o no se ven tan afectadas, cuando llega la crisis de verdad; esa es la razón de que estén preparadas para dar saltos asombrosos que hacen que su conducta sea incomprensible para nosotros, aunque excusable. Vio al mirlo inclinar su cabeza y picar a derecha e izquierda, con el gusano colgándole a cada lado de su pico naranja. Los tordos de pecho moteado iban a lo suyo y también una lavandera que corría como con los pasos de la propia Clara. Tordo y mirlo volaron a sus nidos. Tenían alas. El olor a tierra dulce de la encantadora mañana entraba por la ventana abierta y hacía penoso, con el denso gorjeo, trino, pío y canción del aire, resistirse a la inocente intoxicación. ¡Oh amar! No lo dijo, pero si hubiera cantado, como su naturaleza le pedía, lo habría hecho. Su guerra con Willoughby brotaba de un deseo de amar repelido por el disgusto. Su grito de libertad era un grito para ser libre de amar: lo había descubierto, entre estremecimientos; amar. ¡Oh no! No la figura de un hombre ni la impalpable naturaleza, sino amar sin egoísmo y deliberadamente y basar la fuerza en algo. Amar y ser amada un poco, ¡qué fuerza tendría! Podría dirigir todas las palabras necesarias a Willoughby y a su padre, a recaudo de su amor: caminando en este mundo, viviendo en él.

Antes había gritado, desesperada: «¡Si me amaran!». Los celos de la felicidad de Constanza, envidia de su huida, la habían manejado entonces y recordó el grito, aunque no de una manera tan perfecta lo que se había dicho llanamente a sí misma; prefirió pensar que había querido decir: «¡Si Willoughby fuera capaz de un amor verdadero!» Ahora el fuego de su cerebro se había apagado y lo rondaban refugios y subterfugios. La fuerza que le prestaba para abrirse camino hacia la libertad alentaba el pensamiento del amor personal. Poco antes había sentido más bien lo contrario, pero no habría podido existir con ese sentimiento y la libertad no era tan clara en su fantasía como la idea del amor.

¿Eran los hombres, al ser conocidos, como aquel al que tan bien conocía?

La pregunta del architentador era esa.

La puso a un lado. Dondequiera que se volviese la observaba. Conocía mucho de un solo hombre, nada del resto; naturalmente era curiosa. Podría jurarse de Vernon que fuera distinto. Pero era excepcional. ¿Qué ocurría con los demás de la casa?

Las jóvenes suelen estar limitadas a interpretar a los dueños de su destino mediante sus instintos y, cuando esos instintos están aguzados por una actividad excesiva, deben engañar a su condición para permitirse interpretarlos; entonces han de embotarse para que los hombres no vean que estaban dotadas de discernimiento. Siendo la ignorancia absoluta la garantía de la pureza para los hombres, tienen que borrar la escritura de sus percepciones en la pizarra de su cerebro: los hombres no tienen que saber cuándo saben las mujeres. El instinto de tratar de saber, cruzado con la tarea de borrar el conocimiento, suscita el conflicto de la criatura natural con la artificial al que se debe, en última instancia, la revelación de sus dos caras, de la que se quejan los hombres eternamente insatisfechos. No es en absoluto extraño que se consientan el anhelo de ser bobas ni que muchas interpreten ese papel. No las abucheemos por no mostrar que han crecido. Las hemos educado para ese tono y con ese tono nos han civilizado parcialmente. Suponiendo que quisiéramos ser completamente civilizados, deberíamos conceder tantos puntos en nuestras peticiones como hacen falta para que los ingenios de las mujeres jóvenes recojan su cosecha y sean útiles para sus almas. Entonces libraremos una batalla más hermosa, más valiente, con mejores resultados.

El ojo interior de Clara se detuvo en el coronel De Craye. Tuvo que borrar inmediatamente la visión del capitán Oxford sobre él, la revelación de su desprecio jovial por Willoughby, la perspectiva de principios veleidosos, las historias baratas de pasajes de amor ligeros.

La borró, se la quitó de la cabeza: así supo que era un Willoughby más dulce y voluble, una clase generosa de Willoughby, un Willoughby mariposa, sin tener la mente libre para resumirlo e imaginarlo como una advertencia. Algunos rasgos suyos, como los que los instintos evocaban, no eran suficientemente llamativos. Además, la mente nublada se oponía a que reviera impresiones.

La voz del joven Crossjay en el tranquilo aire de la mañana llegó a sus oídos. ¡La querida e inocente voz del muchacho! Bueno, seguramente el joven Crossjay era el hombre al que amaba y él la amaba a ella. Crossjay sería un hombre fuerte, sincero, protector, sin egoísmo, el hombre que anhelaba como ancla. ¡Oh la querida voz! El pájaro carpintero y el tordo en uno. No paraba de hablar con Vernon Whitford mientras caminaba a su lado a zancadas hacia el lago para su natación matutina. ¡Feliz pareja! La mañana les daba a ambos una frescura e inocencia sobrehumanas. A Clara le parecía que estaban hechos del aire de la mañana y la transparente agua del lago. La voz de Crossjay recorría la escala diatónica, preguntando en semitono y riéndose en una nota resonante. Clara se preguntó de qué podría estar hablando sin parar e imaginó todo el diálogo. Hablaba de su ayer, de su hoy y de su mañana, que no implicaban pasado ni futuro, sino su vivaz presente. Se sintió como si tratara de volar en vano para oírlo; se sintió vieja. El consuelo al que llegó fue sentirse maternal. Deseó abrazar al muchacho.

Crossjay y Vernon entraron al trote en el parque, sin preocuparse por la hierba húmeda ni mirar una sola vez la casa. Crossjay se adelantó y recogió unas flores, juntándolas para mostrarlas. El corazón de Clara latió al imaginarse que mencionaran su nombre. ¡Apreciaría esas flores si fueran para ella!

Los dos bañistas se sumergieron en una ondulación.

Al perderlos de vista sonaron sus cadenas.

Profundizar en sus problemas surte sobre los jóvenes el efecto del olvido; como no pueden pensar sin imaginar, sus imaginaciones se saturan de sus placeres y la colisión, por incapaces que sean de intercambiar la dulzura por la tristeza, destila un opiáceo.

«¿Estoy solemnemente comprometida?», se preguntó. Le parecía estar despertándose.

Miró su cama, donde había pasado la noche gimiendo en vano, y al exterior, en las altas ondas de hierba, donde Crossjay y su buen amigo se habían desvanecido.

¿Tendría que volver a empezar la lucha?

Poco a poco la comprensión de su verdadera posición aumentó hasta inundar su corazón.

«¡Estoy en su casa!», dijo. Parecía un descubrimiento por la manera tan extraña como su opiáceo y los poderes del ensueño habían forjado su tormento. Lo dijo sin aliento. Estaba en su casa, su invitada, su prometida, comprometida con él. El hecho parecía cortado en acero a la despiadada luz del día.

Esa consideración la llevó a ser una vagabunda madrugadora tras los pasos de Crossjay.

Su lugar estaba entre hayas al margen del camino de vuelta del muchacho y, mientras lo esperaba, la novedad de su espera para abordar a alguien —¡ella, que había desempeñado el papel contrario!— le dijo más de lo que le fue grato pensar. Sin embargo, admitió que deseaba hablar con Vernon como consejero, severo y breve, pero íntegro.

Los bañistas reaparecieron en el borde de hierba, corriendo y batiendo toallas mojadas.

Alguien los saludó. Un sonido de cascos galopantes llamó la atención de Clara hacia la avenida. Vio a Willoughby cruzando el límite del parque y, dejándole caer una palabra a Vernon, alejarse. Entonces se permitió ser vista.

Crossjay gritó. Willoughby volvió la cabeza, pero no la cabeza de su caballo. El muchacho saltó sobre Clara. Había cruzado el lago a nado, había competido con el señor Whitford y ¡le había ganado! ¡Cuánto habría deseado que la señorita Middleton hubiera estado con ellos!

Clara lo escuchó con envidia. Pensó: «¡Nosotras, las mujeres, estamos clavadas a nuestro sexo!»

Dijo:

—Acabáis de hablar con sir Willoughby.

Crossjay imitó el modo como el baronet decía adiós con la mano.

No lo habría hecho si no hubiera puesto algo de simpatía en la actuación.

Clara se abstuvo de sonreír. Crossjay lo repitió y se rio. Hizo toda una exhibición para el señor Whitford, que se acercaba:

—Y yo digo, señor Whitford, ¿quién es esta?

Vernon trató de cogerlo. Crossjay se escapó y repitió su magnífico gesto a distancia.

—Buenos días, señorita Middleton. Ha salido temprano —dijo Vernon, pálido y fibroso tras el baño frío y algo ceñudo con el mordaz ejercicio que le había seguido.

Clara esperaba algo de una amabilidad que quería rechazar, pues Vernon podía hablarle amablemente y ella lo consideraba el médico que podía ofrecerle al menos un medicamento fútil.

—Buenos días —contestó.

—Willoughby no volverá a casa hasta la tarde.

—No podría usted haber elegido una mañana más hermosa para su baño.

—No.

—Caminaré al paso que prefiera.

—Ya he entrado en calor.

—Pero usted prefiere caminar ligero.

—Fuera.

—¡Ah! Entiendo. ¡El camino de vuelta! ¿Por qué se ha ido Willoughby hoy?

—Por negocios.

Tras varios pasos, Clara dijo:

—Está muy seguro de papá.

—No sin razón, ya verá —dijo Vernon.

—¿Puede ser? Estoy sorprendida. Papá me lo había prometido.

—Dejar la casa un día o dos.

—Habría sido...

—Tal vez. Pero otras cabezas están pensando además de la suya. Si usted fuera en serio, se lo habría dicho a su padre enseguida. Ese fue el camino que me atreví a proponerle, con ese supuesto.

—¡En serio! No puedo imaginar que lo dude usted. Quería ahorrárselo.

—Es un caso que no puede ahorrarse.

—¡Si estuviera ligada a cualquier otro! No sabía *quién* me tenía prisionera. Pensaba que solo tenía que hablar con él sinceramente.

—No hay muchos hombres que entreguen su premio por una palabra; Willoughby sería el último.

«Premio» la hizo estremecerse en boca de Vernon y mitigó su degradación.

Le habría gustado rebatir que fuera un premio; un premio pobre, en cualquier caso, en modo alguno para la estimación general; solo para alguien que estima su propiedad; no en su verdadero sentido.

La impertinencia del dolor la salvó.

—¿Cree que puedo volver a cambiar? ¿Me tratan como si fuera algo que han ganado a la lotería? Estar aquí es más... Más de lo que puedo soportar. Si él es calculador, señor Whitford, si está haciendo cálculos respecto a otro cambio, su complot para que me quede es desconsiderado y no demasiado sensato. *Puede* haber cambios en ausencia.

—Sensato o no, tiene derecho a planear lo mejor que se le ocurra para conservarla a usted.

Clara miró a Vernon con una sombra de sorpresa recriminatoria.

—¿Por qué? ¿Qué derecho?

—El derecho que usted admitió cuando le pidió que la liberase. Tiene derecho a pensar que usted la ha engañado y a pensar que usted puede tener una disposición más favorable si se queda, una disposición más grata para él, quiero decir. Tiene un derecho absoluto. Tiene que recordar también que usted está equivocada. Lo confiesa al apelar a su generosidad. Cualquier hombre tiene derecho a retener un tesoro en su mano si puede. Mire de frente estos hechos.

—¡Espera de mí que sea solo razón!

—Trate de serlo. Es el modo de saber si usted va realmente en serio.

—Lo intentaré. ¡Será peor para mí!

—Inténtelo sinceramente. Lo más sensato para usted ahora, en mi opinión, es decidirse a quedarse. Hablo como la persona cuyos rasgos usted esbozó para sí misma. Bueno, entonces un amigo repite el mismo consejo. Podría haberse ido con su padre. Ahora solo lo alterará y enojará. Ha rechazado irse.

—¿Son las mujeres tan mudables como los hombres, entonces? Papá consintió; estuvo de acuerdo; compartía algunos de mis sentimientos; lo vi. Eso fue ayer. ¡Por la noche! Se dirigió a cada uno de nosotros en un tono distinto al acostumbrado. Conmigo apenas fue afectuoso. Pero, al aconsejarme que me quede, tal vez no haya reflexionado usted que eso suponga el sacrificio de todo el candor.

—Considérelo un término de prueba.

—El asunto ha ido demasiado lejos para mí.

—Piense con la cabeza: pruebe el caso ahí.

—¿No me está aconsejando como si yo fuera una mujer inteligente?

Vernon se estremeció ligeramente.

—Es usted inteligente —dijo, bajó la cabeza y cruzó el césped, dejándola atrás. Tenía que vestirse.

No pudo permitirse sentirse sola, pues enseguida se le unió el coronel De Craye.

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38 Horacio, *Sermones,* 2.6.1: «Un trozo de tierra no muy grande».

39 Horacio, *Sátiras,* 2.1: «Qué virtud y cuánta en ser pobre».

XXII

El paseo a caballo

CROSSJAY corrió hacia ella por delante del coronel.

—Señorita Middleton, podríamos pasar el día juntos nosotros después de las lecciones. ¿Vendrá a pescar conmigo y ver mis nidos?

—No para tener la satisfacción de ver otra cabeza rota, hijo mío —se interpuso el coronel e, inclinándose hacia Clara:

—La señorita Middleton estará exclusivamente a mi cargo todo el día, con su permiso.

—No lo sé —dijo ella, con una sensación de languidez que parecía albergar alguna reminiscencia.

—Si me quedo. Los planes de mi padre son inciertos. Hablaré con él. Si estoy aquí, tal vez a Crossjay le gustaría montar a caballo esta tarde.

—¡Oh, sí! —gritó el muchacho—. Hasta Bournden, por Mewsey hasta el faro de Closham y luego Aspenwell, donde hay un valle para correr. ¡Y vadear la corriente!

—Un aliciente para usted —le dijo De Craye.

Clara sonrió y estrechó la mano del muchacho.

—No iremos sin ti, Crossjay.

—¿No llevas un peine, hombrecito, cuando te bañas?

Al oír la observación del coronel, el joven Crossjay se imaginó el aspecto de sus apelmazados rizos a los ojos de su adorada dama. Volvió a mirarla ruborizado y salió corriendo.

—Me gusta ese muchacho —dijo De Craye.

—Yo lo amo —dijo Clara.

Los párpados contritos de Crossjay en su sincero rostro juvenil se convirtieron en una imagen para ella.

—Al fin y al cabo, señorita Middleton, los planes que Willoughby tiene para él no son tan malos si tenemos en cuenta que usted ocupará el lugar de una madre para él.

—Creo que son malos.

—No quiere calcular la buena fortuna del muchacho teniéndola más a usted en tierra de lo que la tendría en botones de corona y ancla.

—¿Ha hablado de él con Willoughby?

—Hablamos anoche.

¿Cuánto?, pensó ella.

—¿Vuelve Willoughby? —dijo.

—Cenará aquí, lo sé, pues tiene la llave de la bodega interior y el doctor Middleton le hace el honor de aplaudir su vino. Willoughby fue tan bueno que me dijo que pensaba que yo podría contribuir a divertirla a usted.

Clara se quedó tan estupefacta con su padre y el vino que le pidió al coronel De Craye que persuadiera a Willoughby de que tomara la perspectiva general del futuro de Crossjay y obrara al respecto.

—¡También él parece encariñado con el muchacho! —dijo De Craye distraídamente.

—¿Lo duda?

—De ninguna manera. Pero ¿no es Willoughby (¡los hombres son bichos raros!), concedámoslo, algo tiránico, gratamente, con aquellos con los que se ha encariñado?

—Aunque miren a derecha e izquierda...

Esto quiso decirlo en tono interrogativo, pero no sonó así cuando salieron las palabras.

—¡Mi querido Crossjay! —suspiró—. Pagaría por él de mi propia bolsa antes de que perdiera su oportunidad. No me he decidido a proponerlo.

—Podría ser un error, señorita Middleton. Willoughby habló del cariño del muchacho hacia él.

—Lo haría.

—Supongo que es bastante peculiar al complacerse en interpretar a la Estrella Polar.

—Tal vez no.

—Por lo demás, la influencia de usted habría de ser todopoderosa.

—No lo es.

De Craye miró sin rumbo a los cielos.

—Tenemos un tiempo soberbio. Lo extraño es que cada vez que tenemos un tiempo espléndido en casa

deseamos marcharnos al extranjero. Estoy inscrito para un crucero por el Mediterráneo, pospuesto para dar lugar a su ceremonia.

—¡Qué! —Clara no pudo dominar su acento.

—¿Qué podría merecer más la pena?

La pausa la delató.

De Craye la salvó de una incómoda prolongación.

—He escrito medio ensayo sobre las lunas de miel, señorita Middleton.

—¿Es eso lo mismo que un ensayo a medio escribir, coronel De Craye?

—Exactamente lo mismo, con la diferencia de que es un ensayo completo escrito desde un punto de vista.

—¿Cuál?

—El del soltero.

—¿Por qué se preocupa por este tema?

—Para abrigarse por haberse quedado a la intemperie.

—¿Siente envidia?

—Ha de confesarla.

—Tiene libertad.

—Un artículo cuyo valor no podría estimar si no hay nadie que la comprara.

—¿Por qué habría de desear venderla?

—Quiere acabar su ensayo.

—Para que la lectura no sea aburrida.

—Ahí está la clave del tema. ¿Para qué rescatar a la pareja de una monotonía multiplicada por dos? Por eso, la recomendación del soltero, cuando cada uno de los miembros de la pareja ha descubierto la persona adecuada con la que aburrirse, consiste en empujarlos desde la puerta de la iglesia a una serie de aventuras que contienen una pizca de peligro. Que sus vidas corran peligro un día o dos. La soledad de un soltero es un asunto privado suyo; no tiene que mirar al rostro de nadie para avergonzarse por sentirla e infligírsela al mismo tiempo; es su almohada; puede golpearla cuando quiera y darle la vuelta si prefiere una poderosa variación; hay sueño en ella. Pero nuestra pobre pareja está completamente despierta. Su sueño se ha cumplido. Han vaciado la botella de su elixir, o se ha roto, y ella está sedienta de usar su lengua y él de bostezar con un amigote, sin darse cuenta de que podrían conversar más que el desierto que se ha bebido un aguacero. Así, lo antes posible ella se marcha con las señoras y él se instala en el club. Eso es lo que nuestro soltero ve y querría ahorrarles a ambos, y si no viera algo que vería si no tuviera la soga al cuello, de rodillas en el rocío ante la lechera de la mañana.

—El soltero está felizmente en guardia —dijo Clara, divertida, como deseaba estar—. Dibújeme algunas de las aventuras que propone.

—Tengo un amigo que llevó a su prometida en un bote desde las Cámaras del Parlamento, Támesis arriba, hasta el Severn o hasta el norte de Gales. Sortearon presas y rápidos.

—Eso es hermoso.

—Pasaron una infinidad de aventuras y la mejor prueba del beneficio que obtuvieron es que se olvidaron de sí mismos mientras las pasaban.

—Tuvieron que volver exultantes para complacerle.

—Volvieron y brillaban como un faro para el marinero. Ya ve, señorita Middleton: estaban el paisaje y el ejercicio y un poco de peligro circunstancial. Creo que es recomendable. La escena es siempre cambiante y no demasiado rápida ni demasiado sublime, como las grandes montañas, para que se cansen de los eternos ¡Oh! Esa es la diferencia entre encontrarse bajo el aullido del viento y lanzarse entre céfiros. Tienen aire libre y movimiento y no van en tren; pueden captar lo que ven. Ella lleva las riendas y ese es un buen comienzo. Mi señor se pasa el día haciendo una exhibición de su fortaleza viril, poniendo a los pies de ella una docena de ejemplos por minuto, y ella, para ayudarlo, se inclina cuando le apetece. Están cara a cara, en medio de la naturaleza de las cosas, no bajo la obligación de contemplar lo impronunciable, porque, ya ve, están ocupados, y el bote es el tercero, sin interferir nunca, pero sin que pueda ser descuidado. Sienten que están trabajando juntos para salir adelante, todo en su debida proporción, y aunque él no tenga que trabajar en la vida, pone a prueba su habilidad. ¿Qué piensa de todo esto, señorita Middleton?

—Creo que solo tiene que proponerlo, coronel De Craye.

—Y si vuelcan, bueno, ¡es una inmersión natural!

—Se olvida de la bolsa de la señora.

—¡La mancha en el metal que le recuerda constantemente su destreza en salvarla! Bueno, hay una alternativa a ese plan y es más hermosa. Esta: leen piezas dramáticas durante el cortejo para impedir que se digan cosas una y otra vez hasta que el zumbido de los oídos sea un zumbido en la cabeza y, poco ates de que

firmen en el fatal Libro de Registro de la sacristía, llegan a un acuerdo con una compañía de actores de provincias para unirse a ellos el día de su boda y se van, y ella es lady Kitty Caper durante un mes y él sir Harry Highflyer. ¡Fíjese cómo se devana la luna de miel! Lo maravilloso, para mí, es que ninguno de los dos se fija. Disfrutan del mundo, ven la vida, se divierten con la compañía y vuelven renovados a sus caracteres en lugar de darse una dosis de África sin un salvaje que la diversifique: una impresión de la que no se recuperan, me han dicho. Más de un carácter con los mejores auspicios se ha echado a perder irreparablemente en una luna de miel ordinaria. Por mi parte, me inclino al segundo plan de campaña.

Se esperaba de Clara que respondiera y dijo:

—Probablemente porque a usted le gusta actuar. Requiere capacidad por ambas partes.

—Señorita Middleton, *yo* alentaría el entusiasmo por el escenario y la aventura.

—Lo recomienda en general.

—Que mi caballero tenga un poco de aprecio por el entusiasmo. La dama se encenderá. Siempre lo hacen con una chispa.

—¿Y si él no lo tiene?

—Entonces me temo que sea mortalmente aburrido.

Clara dejó que el silencio hablara por ella; sabía que lo hacía con elocuencia y no podía dominar el presagio que se cernía con ello sobre el único punto de luz revelado en el «¿Y si él no lo tiene?». Su figura pareció haberse puesto un sombrero y una chaqueta de aburrimiento.

Estaba llena de furia y de rabia, harta de su situación; aunque era consciente de la vergüenza que ahora amenazaba lo que hiciera, se convirtió en ira y arrojó la carga sobre el autor de su desesperada angustia. Había pasado la hora de culparse a sí misma y ahora tal vez se renovara en una temporada de libertad. Carecía de intuición para el presente, tan ciega para sí misma que, aunque era consciente de que el amigo de Willoughby la estaba escrutando, le agradeció de todo corazón que simplemente tratara de divertirla y casi lo hubiera conseguido. Pasear a caballo esa tarde con él y Crossjay era una perspectiva halagüeña para ella.

Leticia apareció para separarla del coronel De Craye. No se había visto al doctor Middleton desde el desayuno, donde cierto aire de ansiedad por la presencia de su hija le dio el aspecto de un mapa que a intervalos se le dibujara en la frente. Pocas cosas en la tierra son más merecedoras de nuestra simpatía que un buen hombre con la conciencia turbada.

La perturbación del reverendo doctor no pasó inadvertida. Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel, conocedoras de que su hija era la causa, la culparon y le habrían ayudado a escapar, pero la señorita Dale, a quien él cortejó con ese propósito, fue de la facción opuesta. Preparó el camino para que Clara se llevara a su padre. Llamó a Vernon, que se limitó a asentir mientras salía de la estancia con Crossjay.

Una mirada de reojo a la patética salida del doctor Middleton de la cautividad le bastó al coronel De Craye para darse cuenta de que la casa se había dividido en dos partidos. Al principio pensó que sería una lástima perder a la señorita Middleton durante dos o tres días y le sorprendió que Vernon Whitford y Leticia Dale la secundaran sin un propósito discernible. Pertenecía a la clase de caballeros de mentalidad oscuramente clara que tienen una agudeza predeterminada en su contemplación del drama humano y marcan a los hombres y a las mujeres como piezas de una mala partida de ajedrez, cada una de ellas siguiendo una dirección interesada. Su experiencia de una parte del mundo lo había educado —como el camarada galante, franco y viril que más podía desearse— hasta ese punto. Pero enseguida abandonó las especulaciones, que podían compararse a una sacudida del anemómetro que no permite al indicador dar una predicción. Apoyándose en sus percepciones e instintos, fijó su atención en las personas principales, fijándose en los demás solo para establecer un postulado: que había partidos en una casa cuya persona más cautivadora era el origen. Ese es el logro de Helena. La señorita Middleton le pareció cautivadora más allá de todo lo mortal; radiante en su risa, sombría en su sonrisa, una joven formada para una música perfecta con un enamorado.

Clara era eso, y no menos, para la mirada de cualquier hombre sobre la tierra. Una elevada crianza no había enfriado su encantadora juventud. Pero Willoughby sí. Esa reflexión borró suntuosas imágenes suyas y se hizo aceptable para devolver al coronel algunos ejemplos de una evidente falta de armonía en la pareja.

Y ahora (no por un impulso completamente indirecto de nuestro interior, aunque seamos agentes con los ojos vendados y dirigidos) es necesario que un honorable caballero lance vehementes reprimendas al camarada que no aprecia la joya que ha ganado. ¿Cómo podía Willoughby comportarse como un asno? De Craye sabía que era internamente rígido, extraño, exigente: las mujeres hablaban de él; había sido demasiado para una mujer, la elegante Constanza. Había desgastado a una mujer, sacrificándose mucho más que Constanza, hasta la muerte. Sin embargo, con un premio como Clara Middleton, la conducta de Willoughby era despreciablemente absurda más allá de todo cálculo. ¡Y durante el cortejo! ¡Y el cortejo de esa muchacha! Era la conducta de un hombre diez años después de casado.

La idea lo llevó a imaginarla cariñosamente en su joven florecimiento maternal después de diez años ca-

sada: sin un roce de la edad, sabiamente maternal, dulcemente femenina, tal vez con una pareja de retoños que amar, sin haber conocido el amor de un hombre.

Pensar que una muchacha como Clara, a los veintinueve, ¡y con dos hijos!, no hubiera conocido el amor de un hombre ni posiblemente el amar a un hombre se convirtió en una tortura para el coronel.

Para apaciguarse, tuvo que reconsiderar que solo tenía diecinueve y no estaba casada.

Pero estaba comprometida y no era amada. Podía jurarse que no era amada y no era una muchacha que se contentara con una gran casa y un marido de nariz prominente.

Hubo una rápida alteración de la triste historia de Clara, la madre sin amor que encontraba solaz en dos hijos. Una Clara sin hijos trágicamente amante y amada cruzó como un destello el oscuro cristal del futuro.

En cualquier caso su hado era cruel.

Cierto asombro conmovió a De Craye en la contemplación de la distancia que había recorrido en ese páramo fantástico. Distinguía la opción que se le ofrecía —avanzar o retroceder— y escogió seguir adelante. Pero la fantasía estaba muerta: la poesía que se cernía sobre Clara era invisible para él y se quedó en el páramo; eso era todo lo que sabía y, al momento, se hundió aún más. Era consciente de un intenso deseo de ver su rostro para volver a estudiar sus rasgos. No entendía nada más.

El corazón del hombre nublaba su cerebro; el conocimiento le decía que estaba cautivo.

El asombro volvió a conmoverlo. Hasta ahora su papel había sido hacerles daño a las mujeres y evitar la venganza del sexo. ¿Qué había en el rostro y en el porte de la señorita Middleton que cautivaba a un veterano miembro de la sociedad de treinta y seis años, tantos como conquistas? «Cada bala ha tenido su diana». Le habían dado por fin. El accidente del señor Flitch había detonado el disparo. Directo al corazón, no nos damos cuenta de nuestra desgracia hasta que el corazón trata de renovar su pulso natural. Le vino, en la figura de un jarrón de porcelana, un pensamiento de la señorita Middleton por encima de él, postrado en el camino, y seguir a su lado hasta la casa. ¿Sus palabras? ¿Cuáles habían sido? No había pronunciado palabra, había dejado caer significados. Ni por un instante pensó el coronel haberla encantado: el encanto que ella había arrojado sobre él era demasiado excitante como para que la vanidad levantara la cabeza; sin embargo, ella había disfrutado de su conversación. A cambio de su comentario sobre la fuente irlandesa, era obvio que el coronel De Craye la había aliviado. ¿No era evidente que una muchacha tan vivaz moriría en manos de un hombre como Willoughby? No estaba moribunda: no había respondido a un cumplido por su próximo matrimonio. Una alusión a ello había asesinado su sonrisa. El caso del señor Flitch, con su apuesta sobre la readmisión en el servicio de la casa, era una prueba evidente de la opinión que Clara tenía de Willoughby.

Era necesario de nuevo que le reprochara a Willoughby su locura. ¿Por qué se preocupaba por ella? En cierto modo lo estaba haciendo.

¿Qué ocurriría si Willoughby, igual que la señorita Middleton, deseara librarse del compromiso?

Por un segundo, el apuesto oficial adulado por las mujeres puso a prueba su corazón de hombre de un modo más completo del que suponía. El gran órgano, en lugar de esquivar el pensamiento, fue sometido a revisión.

Tengamos en cuenta que su corazón no era solo el de un hombre, sino el de un conquistador. Pertenecía a la raza de héroes del amor que encuentran la gloria en la persecución, en dar caza, en someter: arrebatar la presa a un rival, tenerla madura gracias a conflictos interiores exquisitamente femeninos, vencer su resistencia a la antigua manera. Ganamos la criatura en sus deliciosos aleteos. Le gustaba así, a sangre fría, debido a la admiración que la sociedad siente por el que captura y, en cierto modo, por la lucha, que siempre aumenta el valor de una presa y refresca nuestra vanidad en el recuerdo.

Además, había sido comparado con Willoughby: la circunstancia se había repetido dos o tres veces. Podía nombrar a una dama que él había ganado, a una dama que él había perdido. La gran fortuna de Willoughby y su gran estilo le había dado ventajas al principio. Pero el principio a menudo significa la carrera con las mujeres y un poco de suerte.

La suave revisión del palpitante corazón del coronel De Craye no duró más de un segundo: una simple mirada lateral en un ritmo apresurado. El encanto de Clara para un temperamento como el suyo, es decir, para él en especial, en parte a través de la conquista de De Craye por Clara que se presentaba como el poder que ella tenía de influir en el corazón universal conocido como el corazón del hombre, le aseguró que ella era digna de ser ganada incluso a una mano que la dejaba caer.

De Craye tenía ahora una doble razón para lamentar la locura de Willoughby. El trato que Willoughby le daba a Clara mostraba carácter o fatiga. La vanidad y el juicio llevaron a De Craye a suponer lo primero. Considerando sus sentimientos por Willoughby, había llegado a esa conclusión. Su certeza al respecto le hizo asumir que Willoughby tenía un conocimiento absoluto del carácter de Clara: ella era un ángel de naturaleza flexible; un alma celestial con media docena de trucos terrenales. «Potrilla inquieta» era una de las fra-

ses del coronel, pero Clara tenía una mirada y un porte que prohibían hundirse en la vulgaridad para pintar la criatura que era.

Por primera vez en su vida, el coronel tenía que ver si estaba equivocado. Si no lo estaba, tenía una oportunidad.

Podía no haber nada deshonroso en rescatar a una muchacha de un compromiso que detestaba. El intento de considerarlo un servicio a Willoughby no duró mucho. De Craye desestimó cualquier ardid. Sería un servicio a Willoughby al final, sin duda. Con eso calmó su honor masculino. Mientras tanto tendría que enfrentarse al pensamiento de Willoughby como antagonista y el mundo empezó a resultar gravoso para su honor como amigo.

Esas consideraciones lo llevaron a acercarse con ternura a la señorita Middleton. Hemos de confesar, sin embargo, que el ardor mental del coronel De Craye se había serenado al contemplar la posibilidad de que los dos miembros de la pareja estuvieran de acuerdo en el asunto de su compromiso. Deseable como era que estuvieran unidos en el desacuerdo, convertía el romance en un lugar común y a la tercera persona del drama en un palo. A nadie le gusta interpretar ese papel. Las memorias de los favoritos de las diosas, si las tuviéramos, confirmarían los gustos de los hombres al respecto, por divino que sea el premio. Contemplamos el papel que desempeñan.

De Craye cruzaba el vestíbulo desde el laboratorio a los establos cuando Clara cerró la puerta de la biblioteca detrás de ella. Dijo algo caprichoso y no se detuvo, ni él se volvió a contemplar el rostro que tanto había anhelado ver.

Lo que había visto le hizo temer que no habría paseo a caballo con ella esa tarde. Su próximo encuentro le devolvió la confianza: Clara vestía su traje de montar y su rostro era decididamente jovial. Se dio a sí mismo la palabra de mando de adoptar su tono.

Su naturaleza era tan dispuesta como la de Clara. La experiencia lo empujaba más allá de donde ella podía ir con la fantasía, pero la experiencia alzaba un dedo de advertencia sobre sus pasos prácticos y exigía que ella tomara la iniciativa. Clara habló poco. El joven Crossjay, a medio galope por delante, era su tema favorito. Estaba muy cambiada respecto a cómo había estado por la mañana; la viveza que el coronel arriesgó no tenía éxito. La seriedad inglesa lo complacía más. La melancolía marcó el descenso natural. Mencionó la pena que le daba que el velo le estuviera prohibido a las mujeres en los países protestantes. De Craye guardó silencio, por fortuna; no podía pensar en otro velo que el islámico y, cuando lo que ella quería decir le sorprendió, tuvo que admitir que seguir los pasos de una joven dejaba estupefacta la inteligencia de un hombre. Media hora después, le pareció una tontería suponer en ello confianza. Volvió a salvarlo el silencio.

En la aldea de Aspenwell Clara sacó una carta de su regazo y le pidió a Crossjay que la franquease. El muchacho canturreó:

—¡Miss Lucy Darleton! ¡Qué nombre tan bonito!

Clara no mostró que el nombre traicionase nada.

Le dijo a De Craye:

—Eso prueba que no debería estar aquí pensando en nombres bonitos.

Su compañero contestó:

—Puede estar en lo cierto.

Añadió, para evitar la sensación de ser demasiado servicial:

—Los muchachos lo hacen.

—No si tienen maestros severos que les enseñan sus lecciones diarias y algunas de las lecciones de la existencia.

—¿No es Vernon Whitford suficientemente severo?

—El señor Whitford tiene que contrarrestar otras influencias.

—¿La de Willoughby?

—No la de Willoughby.

La entendió. Ella lo había indicado con delicadeza. El corazón del hombre la respetó por eso; no había tantas muchachas que pudieran ser tan consideradas ni atreverse a ser tan directas. De Craye vio que se había puesto profundamente seria y sintió que el amor que ella sentía por el muchacho era maternal, un sentimiento que ya no era el de una doncella.

A la luz de su seriedad, franquear su carta en una aldea lejana, sin confiarla al servicio postal de la casa, podía tener su importancia; no es que ella temiera la violación de su correspondencia privada, pero nos gusta ver que nuestra carta llena de significado entra en la boca del buzón público.

Por tanto esa carta era importante. Suponía una secuencia en la conducta de una joven variable. Unida a su observación sobre el velo y a otras cosas, no a palabras que hubiera musitado (y en las cuales residía su condición), no era irracional suponerlo. Clara podía ser una persona poco coherente. ¡Ojalá él tuviera la cla-

ve!

Clara se refirió una vez a una visita inmediata a Londres, suponiendo que pudiera inducir a su padre a ir. De Craye recordó lo ocurrido en el vestíbulo la noche anterior y el aspecto turbado de Clara.

Cabalgaron a lo largo del valle de Aspenwell hasta el vado; somero, para pesar del joven Crossjay, entre el cual y ellos mismos dejaron un espacio conveniente para que se divirtiera haciendo que su poni chapoteara como señor de la corriente.

La rapidez del movimiento agita la sangre en el cerebro de tal manera que nuestros pensamientos se convierten en destellos y el corazón en su amo.

El galope espoleó a De Craye a atreverse a plantear la pregunta capciosa.

—¿Me dirá los nombres de las damas de honor?

El trote había calmado a Clara, que respondió con precisión:

—No es necesario.

—¿No tengo derecho?

Clara permaneció callada.

—La señorita Lucy Darleton, por ejemplo, de cuyo nombre me he enamorado casi tanto como Crossjay.

—No será mi dama de honor.

—¿Declina la invitación? Añada mi petición. Se lo ruego.

—¿A todas? ¿O a ella?

—¿Han declinado todas las damas?

—La escena es demasiado espectral.

—¿Un matrimonio?

—Las muchachas se han cansado de eso.

—¿De las bodas? Nos sobrepondremos al cansancio.

—De algunas.

—¿La señorita Darleton? Tienta usted mi elocuencia.

—¿Lo desea usted?

—¿Obtener su consentimiento? Desde luego.

—¡La escena!

—¿Deseo eso?

—¡El matrimonio! —exclamó Clara, arrojándose al vado, temerosa de su ingobernable impetuosidad y de lo que esa impetuosidad pudiera haber iluminado. ¡Tú, padre! ¡Tú me has empujado a comportarme así! Se olvidaba de Willoughby con su padre, que no podía dejar una casa cómoda a pesar de sus ruegos ni atender sus explicaciones, a las que había contestado con la horrible reiteración de una falta de comprensión comparable al repique de las campanas.

De Craye le permitió que alcanzara a Crossjay. Entraron en un camino angosto, misterioso por los huevos de aves que podía haber en las cruces de mayo. Como no había espacio para que cabalgaran a la par, el coronel se quedó en la retaguardia y se consoló al contemplar la figura de la señorita Middleton, pero la presteza con la que ella se unió al pasatiempo de Crossjay en busca de nidos no fue tan agradable para un hombre al que ella había herido hasta el punto de la excitación. Su desdeñoso tono al decir «Matrimonio» resonaba en sus oídos. Al parecer, Clara estaba empezando a hacer con él lo que quería de una manera completamente involuntaria.

Clara mantuvo a Crossjay a su lado hasta desmontar y el coronel se quedó con la procesión de ideas elefantinas en su cabeza, que ponderó por su peso natural. No podemos abandonar impunemente la iniciativa. Los hombres que la han tomado son como la caballería puesta a la defensiva: una fuerza pequeña que irrumpa violentamente la dispersará.

La ansiedad por recuperar el terreno perdido redujo las dimensiones de sus ideas a una pauta práctica.

Dos ideas se oponían como duelistas que se enfrentan a muerte. O ella lo sorprendía al confirmar las sospechas que había fundado de sus sentimientos sobre Willoughby en los primeros instantes de conocerla o lo sorprendía como un modelo de coquetería: la casada y la viuda podrían acudir a ella para que les diera lecciones.

Los combatientes intercambiaron disparos, pero se mantuvieron en pie: el encuentro seguía indeciso. Cualquiera que fuera el resultado, no había conocido a una persona tan seductora como Clara Middleton. Su grito de aprensión, «Matrimonio», viniendo de una muchacha, sonaba a una aspiración virginal de su sexo a escapar de la espiral y mostraba un orgullo salvaje que transportaba su deseo por ella a campos superiores.

XXIII

Rasgos de la unión del temperamento y las conveniencias

MIENTRAS tanto, sir Willoughby seguía una línea de conducta acorde con su apreciación del deber consigo mismo. Se había engañado con la noción de que los buenos frutos provendrían de la unión del temperamento y las conveniencias.

Ningún engaño es más antiguo, ninguno en apariencia tan prometedor, estando las dos partes dispuestas a la alianza. Sin embargo, dirán los teóricos de la naturaleza humana, su disposición es obviamente contraria y es cierto, en la medida en que ninguna de las dos se someterá al yugo de una unión establecida; tan pronto como hayan hecho su trastada pedirán el divorcio. Pero tienen atractivos mutuos que las empujan a abrazarse cada vez que coinciden en un mismo pecho; cada una de las dos partes es seria respecto a cuál de las dos es dueña de ese pecho y podrá así oficiar de sacerdote de la ceremonia. La razón es que el temperamento, para garantizar su aparición, desea que se piense de él que es tan deliberado como las conveniencias y las conveniencias, para probar su sagacidad, se impacientan con la sangre fría del temperamento.

Estaría bien que los hombres se decidieran, a la primera aproximación de la amorosa, pero voluble, pareja a prohibir incluso una unión temporal accidental, pues la sorprendente dulzura de la pareja, cuando nada más que su espectro se presenta en una mente que proyecta, es una intoxicación más eficaz que el mosto fermentado o el brebaje de una bruja y, con la apariencia de la sensatez, nos llevarán a la meditación paternal de los antiguos, comparada con la cual las saturnales paganas eran menos impías a la vista de la salud. Este es un lenguaje ampuloso, pero en nuestro diligente camino a través de cualquier carrera humana estamos sometidos a accesos de elevación moral; el tema lo inspira y el sabio que reside en todo pecho civilizado lo aprueba.

Decidido al principio de que el temperamento es fatal para las conveniencias, mantengámoslos separados con ambas manos. Podríamos añadir que dudáramos de nuestras conveniencias y reprimiéramos nuestro temperamento, lo que equivaldría a suponernos sensatos. Sin embargo, incorporando dos o tres capitanes del gran ejército de las perogrulladas que nos ha legado la sabiduría antigua, podríamos poner a nuestro servicio a esos veteranos estafermos para probarnos. Sus admoniciones no serán inútiles a nuestro entendimiento y contribuirán a reconciliarlo con las travesuras de la obstinada conducta joven, de manera que, habiendo aprendido a caminar arriba y abajo gracias a los golpes de una vara sobre su corona, lo hará moderadamente, cautelosa al menos de las esquinas peligrosas.

Ahora bien, a Willoughby no había que enseñarle que el temperamento es fatal para las conveniencias; estaba empezando a ver, por añadidura, que el temperamento que había fomentado era particularmente nocivo para las conveniencias que había adoptado y, aunque su propósito de montar a caballo tras ver el ceño fruncido de su prometida era firme y podría considerarse sagaz, lamentó la fatalidad que lo alejaba de ella en busca de una satisfacción imposible de colmar.

Pero el hecho escueto de que la conducta de Clara exigiera aplicar las conveniencias se cruzó con el temperamento de Willoughby: era muy ofensivo.

Considerando que lo había herido profundamente, invirtiendo los papeles respectivos y adoptando el que le correspondía a él y requiriendo su atención, y el esmerado trato que estaba acostumbrado a esperar de los demás y tenía derecho exigirle a ella, era ultrajantemente injusto. Los sentimientos de un hombre hereditariamente sensible al decoro la acusaban de haber infringido los límites de la decencia y, conociéndose a sí mismo, por el testimonio de su familia, sus arrendatarios y la vecindad, así como el del mundo, amigable cuando Willoughby obtenía lo debido, contemplaba a Clara con un aire puntilloso de haber sido maltratado, no exento de cierta santificación del martirio.

Ni siquiera su enemigo más acerbo habría declarado que era él quien se equivocaba.

La propia Clara no había sido tan audaz como para decirlo. Que le disgustara su persona era algo inconcebible tratándose del favorito de la sociedad. La caprichosa criatura necesitaba probablemente unos azotes para que volviera a comprender el principio llamado dominio, que reside en el hombre.

Pero ¿se los estaba dando él? Si conservaba su ascendiente sobre ella, podía, sin duda, aplicar el látigo a placer, cualquier clase de látigo; podía esquivarla, mirarla con frialdad, mostrarse estirado para dar lugar al sarcasmo, sonreír compasivamente, ridiculizarla, ser amable en cualquier otra parte. Podía hacer todas esas cosas si conservaba algún ascendiente sobre ella y podía hacerlas por la confianza que tenía en su renombrada amabilidad, pues, al hacerlas, podrá sentir que era distinto y su naturaleza cordial estaría allí pa-

ra consolarlo mientras administraba el castigo. Por cordiales que fueran, los escalofríos que sentía provenían del mundo. Su corazón reposaba en esa ficción: la mitad de los corazones que laten adopta una forma suave de esa ficción para mantenerse alegre, y el castigo que Willoughby deseaba infligir no era más que una venganza justa para un corazón bondadoso herido. Si Clara se arrodillara figuradamente, tal vez de manera absoluta, la levantaría y la perdonaría. Anhelaba esa situación. ¡Hacerla entender qué poco lo conocía! Habría merecido la pena que ella hubiera tratado, para restablecer la corriente de confianza, de pintarse a sí misma como era él, cómo era en sí mismo, no cómo era para el mundo, aunque el mundo tuviera razones para honrarlo.

Antes, sin embargo, ella tenía que ser humillada.

Algo le susurró que había perdido su ascendiente sobre ella.

En ese caso, cada golpe que diera la alejaría aún más hasta que la separación entre ellos no pudiera salvarse.

La determinación de no dejarla ir fue el mejor final para el perpetuo darle vueltas que giraba en su cabeza como las ruedas de un molino al pensar en la ofensa que había recibido. Una y otra vez paraba en lo mismo. Era su venganza. Estaba confuso, ¡ella era tan dulce! Clara brilló para él como la brisa soleada sobre el agua. Pensar en ella lo dejó sin aliento.

La temible joven tenía una ventaja mayor sobre los sentidos de los hombres que la belleza soberana.

Sería una locura dejarla marchar.

Sería una crueldad para ella.

Estaba obligado a pensar que ella era de tierna edad y que la locura de la desgraciada era excusable por su extrema juventud.

Arrojamos una flor que nos hemos cansado de oler y no queremos llevar con nosotros. Pero la rosa —la joven— no puede arrojarse impunemente. Un enemigo en forma de hombre está siempre al acecho para apropiarse de ella. Comete latrocinio quien toca lo que hemos rechazado. Willoughby había sido sensible a ello en la persona de Leticia y, ahora se daba cuenta, los encantos de Clara superaban los de la tenue criatura. Diez mil furias se agolpaban a su alrededor al pensar en ella por el camino sin haber apresado toda su floración y olor que pudieran tentar la curiosidad del enemigo, el hombre.

Por otra parte, suponiendo que ella no fuera tocada, desdeñada universalmente por el olisqueo sagaz del enemigo, una solterona miserable durante años, podía sentir punzadas de remordimiento. Un suave remordimiento puede adoptarse como una sensación agradable a la vista del penitente echado a perder a quien hemos golpeado demasiado fuerte. Viéndola penitente, habría estado dispuesto a rodearla con pequeñas muestras de amabilidad comprometida. Dependería de su edad. Suponiéndola aún joven, habría entre ellas momentos cautivadores, en un estilo no carente de familiaridad:

—¿Fue culpa mía, mi pobre chiquilla? ¿He de culparme porque hayas pasado una juventud solitaria sin ser amada?

—No, Willoughby; el error irreparable fue mío, la culpa es mía, solo mía. Vivo para arrepentirme. No buscaba, porque no lo merecía, tu perdón. Si lo obtuviera, necesitaría todo mi amor propio para albergarlo en un seno siempre indigno de ti.

—Puedo haber sido impaciente, Clara: ¡somos humanos!

—No acusaré nunca a alguien a quien doy una indulgencia tan plenaria.

—Sin embargo, ¡mi viejo amor! (solo cito la historia para llamarte así), no puedo estar completamente libre de culpa.

—Para mí lo estabas y lo estás.

—¡Clara!

—¡Willoughby!

—¿He de reconocer la amarga verdad de que nosotros dos, ¡una vez casi uno!, ¡tan cerca!, estamos eternamente separados?

—Lo he pensado. Amigo mío (puedo llamarte amigo: siempre has sido mi amigo, ¡mi mejor amigo! ¡Oh esos ojos fueron míos para saber el amigo que tenía!), Willoughby, en la oscuridad de la noche y durante los días que fueron como noches para mi alma, he visto el índice inexorable que me señalaba el camino solitario a través del desierto desde un paraíso perdido por mi pecado obstinado y gratuito. Nos hemos encontrado. Es más de lo que merezco. Hemos de separarnos. Por misericordia, que sea para siempre. ¡Oh terrible palabra! Acuñada por las pasiones de nuestra juventud, viene a nosotros por nuestras riquezas cuando estamos en la bancarrota de los tesoros terrenales y es el pasaporte de la abnegación para la aflicción que ruega salir de esa esfera de prueba. Willoughby, hemos de separarnos. Es mejor así.

—¡Clara! Uno, solo uno, el último, ¡un beso sagrado!

—Si estos pobres labios, que una vez fueron dulces para ti...

Imprimió un beso, para mantener el lenguaje de la composición imaginaria de su época, cuyas lecturas

favoritas habían inspirado a sir Willoughby un coloquio tan patético.

Ay ella tuvo su beso, y no mezquino. Su intención era la de borrar cualquier vestigio de un atractivo creciente en ella, y hubo un poco de escándalo a su cuenta en el trasfondo que satisfactoriamente zanjó sus asuntos y la dejó «grabada en la memoria, un recuerdo divino para él», como dirían sus romances populares y han dicho durante años.

Por desgracia, el imaginario saludo de sus labios lo devolvió a la Clara palpitante. Salió del vacío como el viento que se agolpa para hundir un bajel majestuoso.

El ensueño le causó a Willoughby una severa conmoción. El esclavo de la pasión piensa en círculos, como corren las liebres: terminaba donde empezaba. La dulzura de Clara lo había expulsado y volvía en un torbellino a su dulzura; siendo incalculable y él insaciable, dará la imagen de su tormento si tenemos en cuenta que la conducta de Clara la convertía en una nube para él.

Con las riendas flojas caballo y hombre, como si volvieran a casa al trote de una caza fangosa, el caballo aguzó sus orejas y Willoughby miró desde el camino hacia las colinas la carrera encabezada por el joven Crossjay desde el valle de Aspenwell hasta el vado. No había confusión respecto a quiénes eran, aunque estuvieran casi a una milla de distancia. Advirtió que no sobrepasaron al muchacho. Se quedaron en el vado, hablando no solo cara a cara, sino muy de cerca. La nueva sensación que Willoughby tenía de él no le permitía saber lo que iba a depararle y le hizo pensar que estaban sumergiéndose cada uno de ellos en los ojos del otro. Entonces ella cruzó el vado y De Craye la siguió, pero no enseguida. ¿Por qué no? Lo había sacudido con uno de sus descarados discursos exultante con el galope. Willoughby los conocía. Significaban intimidad.

La noche anterior le había propuesto a De Craye que llevara a la señorita Middleton a dar un paseo a caballo la tarde siguiente. No se le vino a la cabeza que él y su amigo habían sido rivales. Quería que Clara se divirtiera. Las conveniencias dictaban que cada uno de los hilos se usara para ligarla a su residencia en la casa hasta que él pudiera dominar su temperamento para hablar con ella tranquilamente y abrumarla, como cualquier hombre que vaya en serio, con el dominio del temperamento y un punto de ventaja, puede dar por hecho que abrumara a una joven. Las conveniencias, adulteradas por el temperamento, pero conveniencias al fin y al cabo, lo habían empujado a marcharse por la mañana temprano para buscar una casa con jardín apropiada para el doctor Middleton en un radio de cinco, seis o siete millas alrededor de Patterne Hall. Si al reverendo doctor le gustaba la casa y la aceptaba (y Willoughby había visto el lugar apropiado), la vecindad sería una cadena para Clara, y si la casa no complacía a un caballero difícil de complacer (salvo con un vino venerable), tendría una excusa para visitar otras casas y podría responder a su impertinente hija que creía tener una casa excelente en perspectiva. Había preparado por medio de numerosas insinuaciones al doctor Middleton para hacer frente a una mala interpretación de Clara de una riña de enamorados, de modo que todo parecía prometedor hasta donde Willoughby obedeciera las conveniencias.

Pero la extraña punzada que lo había atravesado lo convenció de que el temperamento había adulterado considerablemente las conveniencias. La lealtad de De Craye a un amigo, cuando una mujer entraba en escena, era notoria. Estaba ahí y era algo flexible; pronto se parecería a la razón manipulada por sofistas. No haber contado con su peculiar lealtad era una prueba de la ceguera que el temperamento arroja sobre nosotros.

Y De Craye tenía una lengua irlandesa y la tenía a su antojo, de manera que podía decir cosas sensatas y absurdos ligeros a discreción. El desbordamiento más fuerte del desprecio del puritano inglés por un charlatán no habría impedido que les gustara a las mujeres. A Clara le gustaba y Willoughby tronó sobre su sexo. ¡A esas cosas absurdas, por la ironía de las circunstancias, confiamos nuestro honor!

Pues él no era un charlatán. Recordaba haber parloteado en los primeros días; había parloteado con un objetivo, deseoso de ser tomado por un muchacho sencillo, despreocupado, vivaz, encantador, como cualquier joven caballero que lleve alegremente la aureola de cincuenta mil libras al año fijada en su coronilla santamente joven. Sin embargo, el desarrollo del espíritu crítico le había informado de que el argot había sido un componente destacado de su parloteo y, habiéndolo considerado con justicia un arte traicionero para su raza y para él, había pasado de las remilgadas y aburridas fases de una indiferencia afectada al puro puritanismo de un desprecio completo de los charlatanes.

Seducían a las mujeres, ¡a las muchachas! ¡Qué despreciable la hueste de las muchachas! Al menos aquella muchacha de allí abajo.

Las mujeres casadas lo comprendían; las viudas también. Puso a una joven viuda encantadora en extremo y aduladora que conocía, lady Mary Lewison, junto a Clara para compararlas, involuntariamente, y, enseguida, en un destello, a pesar de él (habría preferido que fuera de otra manera) y de la elevada cuna y las relaciones de lady Mary, el lustre de plata de la joven empalideció a la pobre viuda.

El efecto de la desafortunada comparación fue una imagen insuperable de los rasgos de Clara que le dio el golpe final. Lo invadieron los celos.

Hasta ahora se había librado de ellos, considerando los celos un diablo extranjero, la condena familiar de la vulgaridad. Los desgraciados podían ser víctimas de la enfermedad. Ni el capitán Oxford, ni Vernon, ni De Craye, ni ninguno de sus rivales le habían causado una sola punzada: lo había hecho la mujer, no el hombre, y lo había hecho de una manera muy distinta a la angustia que ahora lo desolaba; hasta ahora no lo había dejado a ras de suelo, donde los celos mastican la hierba. Willoughby se había jactado por encima de la humillante visita.

Si ese hubiera sido el caso, no tendríamos necesidad de preocuparnos mucho por él. Una carrera o dos con los duendes sería suficiente. Pero deseaba a Clara Middleton de un modo demasiado viril para que una insinuación de rivalidad fuera motivo de celos; en un momento el diablo extranjero lo tenía, estaba encendido: una llama amarilla, podríamos atrevernos a decir para dar una imagen precisa. Ese era realmente el color; pero aceptaremos no haberlo dicho.

Recordemos a los poetas a propósito de los celos. Consisten en ser perseguidos en el cielo de dos por un tercero; precedidos o sucedidos, rodeados, en suma, abrazados, ceñidos por ese tercero infernal: son el lecho de amor de marga ardiente al ver al fulminante tercero en el seno de la dulzura; ser arrastrados al pasado y encontrar el Edén lleno de sulfuro; ser arrastrados a las puertas del futuro y gloriarnos en contemplarlas llenas de sangre; adorar a la amarga criatura temblando y con manos temblorosas agarrarla por la garganta; ser rebajados, ridiculizados, avergonzados hasta la abyección y justificarnos a nosotros mismos victoriosamente en venganza.

Y no hay cambio en lo que sienten los hombres, aunque el hombre moderno sea juicioso en lo que hace.

Conocemos muchas imágenes de hombres transformados en bestias rabiosas por la maldición. La prueba más feroz de nuestro egoísmo obró en el Egoísta la división de sí mismo, una concentración de sus pensamientos en otro objeto, él mismo aún, pero en otro pecho, al que tenía que mirar para descubrirse a sí mismo. Por la apertura de las mandíbulas de su codicia podemos comprender la fuerza insaciable de los celos. ¿Dejar que se fuera? ¡No, aunque se convirtiera en una señal de desprecio público al estrangularla con el yugo! Su concentración era prodigiosa. No estando acostumbrado al ejercicio de los poderes de la imaginación, la conjuró, sin embargo, visualmente ante él hasta que le dolieron las órbitas de los ojos. No veía a nadie más que a Clara, no odiaba a nadie, no amaba a nadie salvo a la intolerable mujer. La lógica que había en él dedujo que ella era individual y distinta a la circunstancia de que solo ella hubiera causado ese dolor. Ella lo había dispuesto a ello, como sabemos. La idea de que De Craye no fuera un extraño para ella cuando llegó a la casa lo arrojó contra De Craye por un instante: podría ser o no que tuvieran un secreto. El hechizo era Clara. Amaba y odiaba de una manera tan portentosa que no tenía otra sensación permanente que no fuera ella. Su alma se retorcía bajo los ojos de Clara en un momento y, al siguiente, se cerraba a ella sin misericordia. Su posesión se le escapaba, se deslizaba hacia el tercero.

¡Le dolería también a él, al tercero! Estar ante el altar para verla ligada, en alma y cuerpo, a otro, sería un fuego suficientemente ardiente.

Lo sería también para ella, en caso de que se opusiera. Concebir su aversión era quemarla y devorarla. ¡Entonces sería suya! ¿Qué dices? ¡Quemada y devorada! Los rivales se desvanecerían. Dejaría de manifestar, de sentir, su reluctancia a casarse con el hombre con el que estaba comprometida.

Al final creyó en su reluctancia. Todo cuanto había hecho falta para conducirlo a esa creencia era la escena del valle. ¡Esa chispa o imaginar esa chispa! Pero la presencia del tercero era necesaria; de otra manera habría tenido que suponer que él mismo era personalmente desagradable. Las mujeres nos devuelven a las condiciones del hombre primitivo o nos ponen por encima de la estrella más rutilante. Pero sea como nos plazca. Que nos digan qué somos para ellas; para nosotros ellas son nuestra espalda y lo que tenemos delante: la Lesbia del poeta, la Beatriz del poeta; la opción es nuestra. Aunque se demostrara que algunas de las cosas más brillantes son el precio de la oscuridad, que estampa su sello en sus palmas, y que algunas son los ángeles mismos de los que hemos oído cantar, no menos podríamos decir que nos han descubierto, que nos tienen por inclinación nuestra. Son para nosotros lo mejor o lo peor que tenemos en nuestro interior. Pero su estado es un juicio a nuestra civilización y, si sigue siendo abigarradamente animal, es porque los hombres primitivos abundan y tienen donde abastecerse. Desde que la dirección es nuestra, los líderes tienen que inclinar la cabeza a la sentencia. Los celos por una mujer son el egoísmo primitivo que trata de refinarse en una fuerza salvaje bajo la aprensión de una invasión de derechos; es un tigre en acción amenazado por un rifle cuando su garra está rígida en la carne ágil: le arroja la carne con rabia al intruso. El Egoísta, que es nuestro macho original en forma de gigante, no tenía a una víctima sangrienta bajo su garra, pero había que aplastar el sexo. Por mucho que prefiera a la que se comporta adecuadamente entre las mujeres, aquella que pueda adorar y ser servil y a quien pueda inspirarse terror, en su ira haría de Beatriz una Lesbia Quadrantaria [40] .

Que las mujeres nos digan cuál es su lado en la batalla. Nosotros no somos tanto la prueba del Egoísta en ellas como ellas lo son para nosotros. Movimientos similares de damas coronadas y sin diadema de intré-

pida independencia sugieren su capacidad circunstancial para ser como los hombres cuando se les da la oportunidad de cazar. En la actualidad huyen y esa es la diferencia. Nuestra manera de cazar las informa de la criatura que somos.

Por oscura que sea la información de las jóvenes, tienen un ardor juvenil al detestar que las vuelve menos tolerantes con el Egoísta que sus perceptivas hermanas mayores. Sin embargo, captan de una manera imponente lo que perciben y la conducta de Clara sería indefendible si su visión femenina y detectora no sancionara la dirección de sus acciones. Al ver a Willoughby, se apartó de él y esquivó su casa como el antro de un ogro. Había enviado su carta a Lucy Darleton. De otra manera, si le hubiera sido posible despedir al coronel De Craye, habría podido, con un cálido beso al pupilo de Vernon, pensar seriamente en el próximo silbato de vapor más allá de las colinas por un compañero de viaje de camino a su amiga Lucy; tan aberrante era para ella guiar a su caballo hacia la casa. ¡Oh comer allí! Tendría que pasar otro día y más: es decir, cuarenta horas, tal vez cuarenta y seis, sin pensar en dormir para que fueran veloces.

Esas eran las interjecciones interiores de Clara mientras el pobre Willoughby ardía con una llama de verdín con el sabor del metal, hasta que el vacío de su pecho no fue muy distinto al de una vieja coraza corroída que, suponemos, encontraran las lámparas de los criminales al excavar junto a estanques cubiertos de verde de terrenos sombríos donde se amontona un cemento extrañamente adhesivo. ¿Cómo describir a ese hombre triste? Sentía vacía la cavidad y pesada, cansado de un combate antiguo y mortal, y ardiendo, profundamente afectado:

> con el hueco estrellado
> de donde huyó el alma,

resentido, impotente para lo que no fuera una perezosa agonía; un espécimen y el motivo de la lucha.

Una moderada reticencia no era suficiente para ahorrarle el dolor: lo intentó; ni para despreciarlo: se hundió también en la profundidad. El hecho de que fuera una joven sana volvió a la superficie de sus pensamientos cono el cuerpo asesinado arrojado al río, que no se hunde y convoca a los elementos de la disolución para flotar. Su gran deseo hereditario de transmitir sus propiedades, riqueza y nombre a una sólida posteridad, aunque lo indujo a su reticencia y desprecio por una naturaleza mezquina y efímera comparada con la suya, lo adhirió desesperadamente a la espléndida salud de Clara. El consejo de ancianos, de quienes descendía, señaló a esa joven por compañera suya. La había cortejado con la idea de que esos ancianos consentían. ¡Estaba sana! También él, pero como si hubiera sido un duelo entre dos claramente designados por la cualidad de su sangre para que una casa perdurase, ella era la primera en enseñarle lo que era sentir su mortalidad.

No podía perdonarla. Le pareció conveniente seguir mostrándose frío y que ella volviera a probar su sombra, cuando su ardiente deseo era estrecharla en sus brazos hasta provocar su compasión.

—¿Has paseado a caballo? —dijo, dirigiéndose a ella cortésmente en la asamblea general sobre el césped.

—Sí, he paseado a caballo —respondió Clara.

—Confío en que haya resultado agradable.

—Mucho.

Eso parecía. ¡Oh sin rubor!

Al instante Willoughby se puso a conversar con Leticia, a quien le preguntó por sus párpados caídos.

—Creo que soy —dijo ella— de constitución melancólica»

Willoughby le susurró:

—Creo en la existencia de específicos, y no hay que ir muy lejos para encontrarlos, para todas nuestras dolencias, salvo las que dependen de los demás.

Leticia no discutió.

De Craye, cuyo humor por estar convencido de que Willoughby se preocupaba tan poco por la señorita Middleton como ella por él se alimentó por la observación inmediata de ambos, se explayó sobre la belleza del paseo y la habilidad ecuestre de su hermosa compañera.

—Deberías montar un circo ambulante —replicó Willoughby.

—¡La idea es digna de tenerse en cuenta! Es una alternativa a la expedición que le propuse, señorita Middleton —dijo De Craye—. ¿Ser yo el payaso? No tengo ninguna objeción. He de leer libros de chistes.

—No lo hagas —dijo Willoughby.

—¡Estropearé mi parte! Pero un payaso natural no ejecutaría una actuación artificial durante un mes, que es el tiempo que propusimos. Agotará su naturaleza en un día y sería sustituido por un asno más estúpido con las mejillas pintadas y un copete bamboleante.

—¿Qué expedición *nos* proponemos?

De Craye comprendió que debía ahorrarle a la señorita Middleton cualquier alusión a lunas de miel.

—Un juego para curarnos de la monotonía.

—Ah —asintió Willoughby—. ¿Has dicho un mes?

—¡Querría que durase años!

—¡Ah! Insinúas alguna de las agudezas del señor Merriman, Horacio. Estoy algo obtuso [41] .

Willoughby se inclinó ante el doctor Middleton y lo separó de Vernon, cogiéndolo filialmente del brazo para hablar con él en privado.

De Craye vio la mirada de Clara conforme su padre y Willoughby se alejaban cogidos de ese modo.

Eso lo alivió de las ansiedades y casuísticas sobre la lealtad. Había pólvora en esa mirada para hacer que un veterano respirase hondo y temblara esperando la señal.

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40 En la edición de 1897 Meredith borró lo siguiente: «Debe ser una Griselda esculpida para él sin que ella advierta el cambio; ha de tener el pode de detenerse entre lo celestialmente bueno y lo brutal».

41 Meredith alude a un publicista de chanzas no identificado.

XXIV

Contiene un ejemplo de la generosidad de Willoughby

Los observadores de una complicación creciente y de un carácter en acción se parecen a los recolectores que solo tratan de recoger sus mazorcas y aumentar sus reservas. Desinteresada o interesadamente se entusiasman con las trivialidades y les dan una importancia exagerada. Los observadores deberían empezar por el precepto de que no todo lo que vemos es digno de ser acaparado y de que las cosas que vemos han de ser proporcionales a lo que sabemos de la situación antes de que nos pongamos a medirlas. Podrían ser observadores agudos sin ser buenos jueces. Ellos no lo creen así y propenden a recolectar deprisa y llegar enseguida a las conclusiones, cuando sus asuntos deberían ser cribados a cada paso y cuestionados.

La señorita Dale secundó a Vernon Whitford en la ocupación de fijarse en las miradas y los tonos y anotar jirones de diálogo. Era completamente desinteresada; Vernon creía firmemente en que él lo era. Hasta ahí eran competentes para desempeñar el puesto y ninguno de los dos imaginaba que pudieran estar involucrados en el dudoso resultado de las escenas de las que eran testigo. Eran observadores ansiosos, recolectores diligentes. Leticia imaginaba que Clara era susceptible al consejo de Vernon; él lo imaginaba y lo consideraba una de sus propias vanidades. Cada uno de ellos comparaba mentalmente lo abrupto de la confianza que Clara había depositado en ellos con su abstención de toda palabra secreta desde la llegada del coronel De Craye. Sir Willoughby le pidió a Leticia que le hiciera compañía a la señorita Middleton hasta donde le fuera posible, mostrando que estaba alerta. Otra Constanza Durham parecía estar batiendo las alas para el vuelo. Lo repentino de la evidente intimidad entre Clara y el coronel De Craye sorprendió a Leticia: su amistad podía contarse por horas. Sin embargo, en su primera entrevista había sospechado la posibilidad de algo peor que lo que ahora suponía que era y le había pedido a Vernon que no dejara inmediatamente la casa a consecuencia de esa tenue sospecha. Había sido llevada a ello al encontrarse a Clara y De Craye en la puerta de su casa, charlando y riendo como amigos. Incapaz de darse cuenta del rápido avance de una familiaridad, más ostensible que real, entre dos naturalezas vivaces tras haber sido presentadas como lo habían sido, con una de las dos languideciendo de vivacidad, Leticia había prestado atención a su apuesta sobre nada en absoluto —un *no* contra un *sí* — en el caso del pobre Flitch y al «Willoughby no perdonará» de Clara y al «¡Oh! Es humano» de De Craye y al silencio de Clara y al grito cordial de De Craye: «¡Flitch volverá a ser el cochero de un caballero en su viejo asiento o no tengo lengua!», que Clara negó con la cabeza, y luego le sorprendió a Leticia que esa joven prometida, cuyo alienado corazón no reconocía un señor una hora antes, hubiera encontrado su igual y, como el observador habría dicho, su destino. Juzgaba la alarmante posibilidad por la reciente revelación que se había hecho a sí misma del carácter de la señorita Middleton y por el hecho de que Clara se hubiera dirigido también a un hombre (a Vernon) y antes que a ella. Que una joven hablara de su intimidad con un hombre, aunque fuera Vernon Whitford, le resultaba a Leticia increíble, pero tenía que ser aceptado como uno de los hechos temibles de nuestra inexplicable vida, que traba las ruedas de nuestros cuerpos y deja gritar a la mente. Si Clara podía hablar con Vernon, lo que Leticia no habría hecho ni sobornada, podía hablar con De Craye, dedujo Leticia: esa era la lógica de cabezas sin adiestrar opuestas al proceder del que depende su deducción reprobatoria. ¡Clara tenía que haber hablado con De Craye!

Leticia recordó lo encantadora y dominante que la señorita Middleton podía ser en sus confidencias. Un caballero podía olvidarse de su deber con su amigo al oírla, pensó, pues Clara la había persuadido extrañamente a ella: pensaba que había sembrado en ella ideas sobre sir Willoughby que no había imaginado antes que albergara, sin preguntarse si la minuciosidad de la joven había dado con ellas y las había hecho levantarse donde yacían inmersas. Mujeres muy amables reciben de ese modo impresiones de personas, especialmente de la persona adorada, que las hieren, como las nuevas fortificaciones con diques de tierra suave, donde los misiles explosivos quedan sepultados inofensivamente hasta que son desenterrados, y esa puede ser una razón por la que esas mujeres heridas sobreviven a una Clara Middleton maltratada de una manera similar.

Vernon tuvo menos en cuenta que Leticia que Clara estaba en estado febril, poco razonable. Había excusado sus confidencias, como una demostración de su conducta, en simpatía con su posición. No le habían sorprendido demasiado las circunstancias que le habían confiado y, en conjunto, puesto que ella estaba excitada y era infeliz, la había excusado por completo. Podría haberla elogiado: era natural que acudiera a él, valiente por su parte hablarle con tanta franqueza, un cumplido que la habría llevado a tratarlo como a un

amigo. Su posición la excusaba ampliamente. Pero no la excusaba de convertir en confidente a De Craye. Había una diferencia.

Bien, la diferencia era que De Craye no tenía el elegante sentido del humor con las mujeres que tenía nuestro mediador: un poder judicial imparcial, como podía verse, y Vernon discriminaba correctamente entre sí mismo y el otro, pero la sensación alcanzaba su cerebro enseguida. Le reprochaba a la señorita Middleton que no se diera cuenta de la diferencia con la misma claridad antes de haber delatado su posición a De Craye, lo que Vernon asumía que había hecho. Por supuesto que lo había hecho. Había sido culpable de ello una vez; en la mente de un amigo ofendido, sería culpable de ello una segunda vez. Era evidente. Las mujeres, predestinadas fatalmente a apelar a aquellos de los que deberían guardarse, han de esperar la severidad cuando se desvían de su camino de raíles; la justicia está fuera de duda: el cerebro del hombre podría administrarla, su sangre no. Haciendo que los escalofríos les recorran la médula, pueden conseguir lo que quieran. Pero ese es un método que atenúa su punto de apoyo.

Por la tarde, la señorita Middleton y el coronel cantaron a dúo. Ella había declinado hasta entonces cantar. Su voz era notablemente firme. Sir Willoughby le dijo: «Has recuperado la riqueza en el tono, Clara». Ella sonrió y pareció feliz de complacerlo. Willoughby mencionó una balada francesa. Ella fue al repertorio y le dio la canción sin que se lo hubiera pedido. «¿Es esta la que te gusta?» Él le susurró a la señorita Dale: «Admirable». Alguien menciono una *canzone* popular toscana. Ella esperaba la aprobación de Willoughby y tomó su asentimiento por una orden.

«¡Traidora!», podría haber bramado él.

Había leído cosas de esa característica de obediencia prestada de las mujeres que van a engañarnos. Se había aprovechado de ello en su época.

«¿Es intuitivamente o por experiencia por lo que nuestros vecinos del otro lado del canal nos superan en el conocimiento de su sexo?», le dijo a la señorita Dale y siguió hablando en medio del apóstrofe de Clara a la *Santissima Virgine Maria,* tratando todavía el temperamento como parte de las conveniencias, sin efecto alguno sobre Clara, hasta convertirse en un asunto para reflexiones enfermizas y envidiosas. El enamorado que no puede herir ha perdido el ancla; va penosamente a la deriva; apuñala el aire, lo que supone apuñalarse a uno mismo. Su complaciente coraza defensiva no le deja saber que ha sido suplantado.

Durante el breve momento de conversación antes de que las damas se retirasen, la señorita Eleanor aludió por azar a la boda. La señorita Isabel le respondió y se dirigieron interrogativamente a Clara. De Craye se interpuso con habilidad. Clara no pronunció una sílaba. Aspiró profundamente y suspiró. Luego miró a De Craye, vagamente, como una persona que se acabara de despertar, pero miró. Le sorprendió su rapidez y agradeció el socorro. Su mirada fue fría, amplia, perdida y no había en ella agradecimiento ni nada personal. Sin embargo, duró demasiado para que Willoughby la soportase. Mascullando «¡Porcelana!» se incorporó: una señal para que las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel se retiraran. Vernon se inclinó ante Clara cuando se levantó. No había estado ni una sola vez en los ojos de ella y esperaba un reconocimiento parcial en la despedida. Ella dio las buenas noches, volviendo la cabeza hacia la señorita Isabel, que estaba lamentando una vez más con el coronel De Craye la ruina de su regalo de bodas, el jarrón de porcelana, que suponía que había estado en la mente de Willoughby cuando dio la señal. Vernon se marchó a su habitación, sombrío como un enamorado ciego: *bile tumet jecur* [42] ; su negligencia lo alcanzó donde un golpe oscurece espesamente los ojos y el cerebro.

Clara vio que lo había apenado y lo lamentó cuando se separaron. ¡Era su verdadero amigo! Pero le había prescrito una tarea muy dura. Además había hecho todo cuanto él le había pedido, salvo consentir quedarse donde estaba y molestar a Willoughby, cuya destreza agotaba su pequeña reserva de paciencia. Se había quejado en vano y suplicado a su padre, embaucado por su anfitrión sin que ella preguntara cómo: ¿con el vino? El pensamiento era repulsivo.

Sin embargo, Clara fue arrastrada al borde de ese pensamiento al contemplar sus planes de liberación. Si Lucy Darleton estuviera en casa, si Lucy la invitara a ir, si ella volara hasta Lucy, ¡oh!, entonces su padre tendría motivos para la ira. ¡No lo recordaría salvo por el odioso vino!

¿Qué había en ese vino añejo que apartaba la cordura, la paternidad? Era su padre querido, ella era su amada hija; sin embargo, algo los dividía; algo había cerrado los oídos del padre para ella. ¿Podía ser esa incomprensible seducción del vino? Su sentido del deber gritó violentamente que no. Se inclinó, estupefacta, a sus argumentos por ahora y se levantó con la cabeza clara y rebelde a la reminiscencia de las muchas y poderosas razones que ella tenía contra ellos.

Lo extraño de los hombres, jóvenes y viejos, las pequeñas cosas (consideraba un gran vino una cosa pequeña) que los hacían oscilar y cambiar la sorprendían. ¡Y son ellos los que acusan a las mujeres de variabilidad! Solo las razones más imperiosas, no trivialidades, mueven a las mujeres, pensó Clara. ¿Causarían las mujeres una herida a alguien a quien amaran por océanos de eso? ¡Ah bah!

Y las mujeres deben respetar a los hombres. Por necesidad respetan a un padre. «¡Mi padre, mi querido

padre!», dijo Clara en la soledad de su habitación, meditando en toda su bondad y esforzándose por reconciliar los desesperados sentimientos de la posición que él la forzaba a sostener con los de una hija llena de veneración. El golpe que iba a caer sobre él la golpeó pesadamente a ella primero. «¡No tengo ni una sola excusa!», dijo, haciendo cuentas. Pero la idea de hacer sufrir a su padre la deprimió por debajo de su propia justificación. Trató de imaginar que se lo ahorraba. Era demasiado ficticio.

El santuario de su cámara, la pura habitación blanca tan cercana a sus sentimientos virginales, inspiraba paz, pero enseguida le seguía una especie de rugido que la dejaba como una cuerda musical mal pulsada. Si se quedaba en esa casa su habitación ya no sería un santuario. ¡Doloroso cautiverio! La insolente muerte no es peor. No podemos alejar el gusano de la muerte, pero cuando nos tiene ya nos hemos entumecido para el deshonor, felizmente insensibles.

La juventud forzaba sus párpados al sueño, aunque estaba temblando, y temblando se despertó al sonido de su nombre bajo su ventana. «Aún puedo amar, pues lo amo», dijo, regocijándose con la voz de muchacho del joven Crossjay, envidiándolo de nuevo por sus baños en las aguas del lago, que le parecía que tuvieran el poder de lavar el pesar y las cadenas. Decidió dejar que Crossjay la viera por última vez en ese lugar. Le alegraría hacerle un favor; la escoltaría en su camino a la estación de ferrocarril a la mañana siguiente y luego lo dejaría hacer novillos todo el día con una breve nota de disculpa que escribiría por él para que se la entregara a Vernon por la noche.

Crossjay había corrido a verla tras desayunar con la señora Montague, el ama de llaves, para decirle que la había llamado.

—Mañana no lo harás. Estaré muy lejos de ti —le dijo y, pensando en su padre, mientras Crossjay prometía ser el primero en levantarse, pensó que era su deber hundirse en otra protesta.

Willoughby necesitaba a Vernon por asuntos privados. El doctor Middleton se dirigió como siempre a la biblioteca tras responder «Le arruinaré» a la generosa oferta de Willoughby para enviar un recado a Londres para los libros que le hicieran falta.

Su hermoso aspecto de serenidad, como el de una montaña que recibe los rayos de la mañana, hizo que Clara no fuera reacia a una escena preliminar con Willoughby que la salvara de molestarlo, pero no pudo detener a Willoughby ni obtener una invitación a hacerlo. Estaba en el vestíbulo, sujetando a Vernon por el brazo. Ella pasó; él no habló y ella entró en la biblioteca.

—¿Qué ocurre, querida? ¿De qué se trata? —dijo el doctor Middleton, viendo que cerraba la puerta.

—Nada, papá —respondió Clara con calma.

—¿No habrás cerrado con llave la puerta, hija mía? Has girado algo ahí, prueba el picaporte.

—Te aseguro, papá, que no le he dado la vuelta a la llave.

—El señor Whitford estará aquí enseguida. Tenemos entre manos un asunto difícil. Las mujeres no tienen, y es una opinión universal que no la tendrán nunca, una concepción del valor del tiempo.

—Somos vanas y superficiales, mi querido papá.

—No, no, tú no, Clara. Pero sospecho que te hace falta aprender con un trabajo pendiente lo importante que es... empezar tranquilamente la tarea del día. No hay un estudioso que no te lo diga. Hemos de tener un retiro. ¡Esas invasiones! ¿Vas a dar otro paseo a caballo? Te hace bien. Mañana cenaremos con la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, una persona estimable, aunque no estoy seguro de nuestra aceptación. ¡No me acuses de haber tomado vino, Clara mía! No lo hago nunca, salvo que me pidan mi opinión sobre un vino.

—He venido a pedirte que me saques de aquí, papá.

En medio de la tormenta suscitada por esa renovación de la perplejidad, el doctor Middleton colocó en su sitió un libro que había movido con el codo, en su precipitación por quitarse el pelo de la frente, y gritó:

—¿Dónde? ¿A qué sitio? Esa lectura de guías de viaje, notas de viaje de gente ociosa, y la correspondencia pintoresca de los periódicos, desestabiliza al hombre y a las jóvenes. Es conocida mi objeción a vivir en hoteles. No dudo en decir que los aborrezco cordialmente. Tuve que someterme penitencialmente a ellos en la época de tu querida madre, καί τρισκακοδαίμον diez mil veces [43] . Pero ¡no querrás que las miserias de un anciano se multipliquen con los años! ¿Es inútil solicitar tu simpatía con un anciano, Clara?

—El general Darleton nos acogerá, papá.

—Su mesa es detestable. No digo nada al respecto, pero su vino es veneno. Pase —debería decir ¡no pasa!—, pero nuestras opiniones políticas difieren. Es cierto que no estamos obligados a proponerlas en su presencia, pero nos falta una opinión en común. No tenemos de qué hablar. Los militares han dado, o disentido de, epicúreos notables; suelen ser devotos, han florecido como hombres de letras, son caballeros, el país les rinde honores, pero, en una línea, rechazo la proposición de ir con el general Darleton. ¿Lágrimas?

—No, papá.

—Eso espero. Aquí tenemos todo cuanto un hombre puede desear; sin discusión, un anfitrión excelente. Pasas una tempestad transitoria en una taza de té, que magnificas como un huracán a la manera históricamente probada del libro de Cupido. Mejor, repito, es mejor que la pases en la infancia de la alianza. ¡Pase!

—gritó el doctor alegremente en respuesta a una llamada en la puerta.

Temía que la puerta estuviera cerrada con llave; temía que su hija tuviera la intención de mantenerla cerrada con llave.

—¡Clara! —exclamó.

Giró el picaporte con reluctancia y las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel entraron, disculpándose con la coherencia que el doctor Middleton esperaba de su sexo. Querían hablar con Clara, pero declinaron llevársela. En vano el reverendo doctor les aseguró que estaba a su servicio; alegaron que tenían muy poco que decir y que no volverían a interrumpirles.

Como una tímida delegación de jóvenes estudiosos delante del maestro, esas palabras que tenían que decir no fueron precedidas por ninguna; un poco de desaliento y una pausa, que, sin embargo, estimularon al doctor Middleton, que jovialmente se anticipó a decir que las señoras podrían tal vez llevarse a Clara cuando hubieran terminado.

—Le pareceremos algo formales —empezó la señorita Isabel, y se volvió a su hermana.

—No tenemos la intención de darle una importancia indebida a nuestra misión, si puede llamarse una misión —dijo la señorita Eleanor.

—¿Se la ha confiado Willoughby? —dijo Clara.

—Querida niña, sabrá lo serio que resulta para nosotras y que nuestro deseo personal es contribuir a su felicidad: Willoughby nos ha confiado que lo digamos.

A continuación, las hermanas se turnaron en dirigirse a Clara y ella las miraba de una a otra, reuniendo fragmentos de significado vacío para captar todo el sentido cuando pudiera.

—... y al decir su felicidad, querida Clara, tenemos la de nuestro Willoughby a la vista, que depende de la suya.

—... y no podemos decir que nuestras inclinaciones se interpongan en el camino.

—... no. Amamos este viejo lugar y si amarlo hasta la idolatría fuera nuestro único castigo, lo consideraríamos un motivo suficiente para nuestra partida.

—... naturalmente sin una sola idea de descortesía, ninguna en absoluto.

—... las mujeres jóvenes prefieren naturalmente ser reinas sin disputa de su propia morada.

—... las jóvenes y las viejas.

—Pero yo —dijo Clara— nunca he mencionado, nunca he pensado...

—... tienes, querida niña, un enamorado que, en su preocupación por tu felicidad, ve tanto lo que deseas como lo que te es debido.

—... y, para nosotras, Clara, reconocer lo que te es debido es obrar al respecto.

—... además, querida, una casa junto al mar ha sido siempre uno de nuestros sueños.

—... no tenemos que enterarnos ahora de que somos una pareja de ancianas, compañeras incongruentes de una joven esposa en el gobierno de una gran casa.

—... con nuestras anticuadas nociones podrían suscitarse cuestiones de manejos domésticos y con la mejor voluntad del mundo para ser armoniosas.

—... por eso, querida Clara, considéralo zanjado.

—... de vez en cuando seremos encantadas vuestras invitadas.

—... vuestras invitadas, querida, no censores críticos.

—¡Piensan que soy tan Egoísta! ¡Queridas señoras! La insinuación de una demostración tan cruel de egoísmo me ofende. No habría dejado que abandonaran la casa. Me gusta su compañía, las respeto. Mi queja, si la tuviera, sería que no se hagan notar ustedes más. ¡Habría deseado que estuvieran aquí como ejemplo para mí! No habría permitido que se fueran. ¡Qué pensará de mí! ¿Ha hablado de esto Willoughby esta mañana?

Era difícil distinguir cuál era la más completa ingenua de esos dos ecos recíprocos en la adoración de un ídolo de la familia.

—Willoughby —la señorita Eleanor se presentó para recibir el título al haber sido la primera en abrir los labios—, nuestro Willoughby es observador —siempre generoso— y no menos previsor. Su disposición es para nuestro bien en todas partes.

—Una señal es suficiente —dijo la señorita Isabel, apareciendo a su vez como el monstruo ingenuo.

—No tendrán que irse, queridas señoras. Si yo fuera el ama aquí me opondría.

—Willoughby se culpa a sí mismo por no haberte tranquilizado antes.

—De hecho nos culpamos a nosotras mismas por no haberlo intentado.

—¿Ha hablado de esto esta mañana? —dijo Clara, pero no podría sonsacarles una respuesta. Retomaron el dúo y se resignó a que sus oídos se llenaran de sinsentido.

—¿Está entendido, pues?

—Son muy amables, señoras.

—¿Vuelvo a ser la tía Eleanor?

—¿Y yo la tía Isabel?

Clara podría haberles estrechado las manos por el impedimento que prohibía a su delicadeza decirles por qué no podía llamarlas así, como había hecho en los primeros días del cortejo de Willoughby. Las besó afectuosamente, avergonzada del beso, aunque el afecto era verdadero.

Se retiraron con una abundancia de excusas ante el doctor Middleton por haberlo molestado. El doctor Middleton las acompañó hasta la puerta y, esperando que Clara se fuera con la procesión, la descubrió en la esquina opuesta de la estancia.

Se debatía con lo aconsejable que sería dejarla allí, cuando Vernon Whitford cruzó el vestíbulo desde el laboratorio, un espejo de sí mismo en su aire descompuesto.

Eso no era importante, en la medida en que Vernon era un freno a Clara, pero en el momento en que Clara, desconcertada, iba a marcharse de la biblioteca, el doctor Middleton sintió el horror de tener enfrente un rostro incómodo.

—¿No se encontrará mal, espero? Es lo peor para trabajar. ¿Dónde ha estado? Sospecho que su punto débil no es armarse de una triple coraza de bronce contra el malestar y la preocupación. No podrá hacer un buen trabajo si no se la pone. Ha salido de aquel laboratorio.

—Sí, señor. ¿Puedo encontrarle algún libro? —le dijo Vernon a Clara.

Ella se lo agradeció, prometiendo marcharse enseguida.

—Estás en la sección de literatura italiana, amor mío —dijo el doctor Middleton—. Bien, señor Whitford, el laboratorio, ¡ah!, donde la cantidad de trabajo durante todo un año no extendería una corriente eléctrica entre esta casa y la estación de ferrocarril, digamos, cuatro millas, la distancia que presumo que hay. Vaya, señor, un diletantismo costoso en tiempo y maquinaria es tan ornamental como las colas de zorro y la cornamenta de ciervo para un caballero independiente cuyos semejantes se contentan con esas últimas decoraciones para su guirnalda cívica. Willoughby, déjeme observar, se ha mostrado recientemente muy considerado con mi hija. Hasta donde puedo adivinar —he estado escuchando un diálogo de señoras—, es tan generoso como discreto. Hay algunos combates en los que sucumbir equivale a llevarse todos los honores, y eso es lo que las mujeres no aprenden. Dudo que vean la gloria en ello.

—Lo he oído; he estado con Willoughby —dijo Vernon apresuradamente para escudar a Clara de los ataques alusivos de su padre. Deseaba transmitirle que su entrevista con Willoughby no había sido provechosa para sus intereses y que haría mejor enseguida, estando él presente para apoyarla, que le abriera por completo su corazón a su padre. Pero ¿cómo transmitírselo? Ella no buscaba sus ojos y él era un intrigante demasiado pobre para estar atento al instante de expresar las oscuridades verbales que son transparentes para nosotros.

—Lamentaría que Willoughby fuera la causa de su malestar, pues está completamente a mi favor —dijo el doctor Middleton.

Clara dejó caer un libro. Su padre se sobresaltó más de lo que su silla consentía a su impulso nervioso. Vernon trató de obtener una mirada y ella fue consciente de su esfuerzo, pero sus sentimientos de ira y de culpa la empujaron a seguir su propio consejo de mantener sus párpados a la defensiva.

—No diré que me haya molestado, señor. Estoy aquí para darle mi consejo y, si no lo acepta, no tengo derecho a enojarme. A Willoughby parece enojarle que el coronel De Craye hable de irse mañana o al día siguiente.

—Le gusta tener a sus amigos a su alrededor. Le doy mi palabra de que no encontraríamos un corazón tan afable aunque camináramos todo un día. Pero usted lo tiene en la frente, señor Whitford.

—¡Oh no, señor!

—¡Aquí! —dijo el doctor Middleton, poniéndose el dedo entre las cejas.

Vernon se tanteó las suyas y esgrimió una excusa por su negrura, inconsciente de que la dirección de su mente hacia Clara lo empujaba a una especie de sombrío doble sentido, mientras satisfacía una ira interior y anhelante al decir:

—Por cierto, he estado dándole vueltas a la cabeza. Debo mostrárselo, señor. Tengo un verso y no estoy seguro de su extensión. ¿Piensa que pasaría la prueba?

Asnea con la lengua de asnear,

lo que significa que destaca sobre cualquiera de nosotros en el dialecto del asno.

Tras un intervalo decente para que pareciera que el genio de la crítica se había asentado en su ceño, el doctor Middleton respondió con una sobria jovialidad:

—No, señor, no la pasaría y su incertidumbre respecto a la extensión del verso solo aumentaría si tuviera cien pies. Nuestra recomendación es que la pula antes de la llegada de la férula. Podría ser así:

lo que significa que lanza de manera eminente promesas hipotéticas a pagar por designación. Eso podría pasar. Pero absténgase de citarme como autoridad.

—El verso sería aceptable si yo pudiera hacer que se aplicara —dijo Vernon.

—O eso... —el doctor Middleton iba a ofrecer una segunda sugerencia, pero Clara se marchó, sorprendida de los hombres como nunca lo había estado. En un mundo que ardía, ¡se ejercitaban en absurdos! ¡Y esos dos estudiosos, hombres instruidos! ¡Y los dos sabían que estaban en presencia de un alma trágicamente febril!

Un minuto después de que hubiera cerrado la puerta los dos se habían puesto a trabajar de firme. El doctor Middleton había olvidado su verso alternativo.

—¿Nada serio? —dijo en reproche por la falta de una claridad honorable en la frente de Vernon.

—Espero que no, señor. Es un caso de sentido común.

—¿Y cree que eso no es serio?

—Creo que la alabanza que Hermann hace del *versus dochmiachus* no solo es seria, sino carente de exageración —dijo Vernon [44] .

El doctor Middleton asintió y entró en el campo vociferante de la métrica griega, sacudiéndose el polvo seco de nuestro mundo de sus hombros.

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42 Horacio, *Odas,* 1.13: «... hierve la bilis en el hígado».

43 «Y tres malos demonios».

44 Gottfried Hermann (1772-1848), clasicista alemán, escribió varios manuales de métrica griega.

XXV

La huida a la intemperie

La mañana de la carta de respuesta de Lucy Darleton a su amiga Clara fue hermosa antes del amanecer con los luminosos colores que son un augurio para el campesino. Clara no estaba tan atenta al clima como para ver el este escarlata ni albergaba un lugar en ella para la belleza. Lo contemplaba como la puerta de una promesa y palpitaba aliviada recordando las cosas radiantes que una vez había soñado que rodearían su vida, pero su pulso acelerado limitó sus pensamientos a la maquinaria de su proyecto. Ella misma era metal y señalaba un solo propósito al moverse. Nada lo perjudicaba, todo lo alimentaba: mentiras piadosas, evasiones, los serenos batallones de mentiras blancas marchando en paralelo a delicadas falsedades. Se había provisto de muchas el día anterior en su preparación del actual. Era urgente prepararse y lo hizo generosamente, arrojando la carga del engaño sobre la extraordinaria presión. «Necesito la mañana temprana; el resto del día seré libre». Se lo dijo a Willoughby, a la señorita Dale, al coronel De Craye y solo a la tercera fue consciente de la deliciosa ambigüedad. Por eso la asoció con el coronel.

Nuestro grito más elevado contra el desgraciado que rompe nuestras reglas consiste en preguntar cómo esa meticulosa persona ha podido hacer esto o lo otro además de la ofensa principal, que manifestamos que podríamos pasar por alto si no fuera por las objeciones menores que pertenecen a la conciencia, las incomprensibles y abominables mentiras, por ejemplo, o la descarada frialdad de mentir. Sin embargo, sabemos que vivimos en un mundo indisciplinado en el que, en nuestras temporadas de actividad, servimos a nuestros propósitos, que provienen de nuestras pasiones y ellas de nuestra posición. Nuestros propósitos nos configuran para el trabajo que hemos de hacer, las pasiones gobiernan el barco y la posición es su defensa: si la conciencia fuera un pasajero a bordo, una mera oscilación de nuestra embarcación la atontaría como si fuera el involuntario huésped de un capitán pirata que esquiva al crucero a través de rocas y bancos de arena para salvar su bandera negra. Cuidado con la falsa posición.

Es fácil decirlo. A veces la maraña desciende sobre nosotros como una plaga sobre un rosal. Hay entonces un instante decisivo para tener el valor de cortarla o desesperarnos por no haberlo hecho. No hay muchos hombres adiestrados para el valor; las mujeres han sido adiestradas para la cobardía. Para ellas, enfrentarse a un mal hablando con llaneza es ser culpables de descaro y de deshacer el pulido de cera de su pureza y, con ello, de su posición de mando en el mercado. Han sido adiestradas para complacer los gustos del hombre y, con ese propósito, aprenden enseguida a vivir para sí mismas y mirarse a sí mismas como él las mira, sin apenas turbarse por lo que no queda al descubierto. Sin valor, la conciencia es un invitado lastimoso y, si todo va bien con el capitán pirata, la conciencia tendrá que pasar por la plancha por no ser útil a ningún partido.

Las mentiras piadosas y evasiones de Clara no la turbaron esa mañana. Había escogido la desesperación y se consideró a sí misma muy valiente porque era lo suficientemente valiente como para huir de lo que aborrecía. Parecía desenfadada o, de una manera más sincera, ebria. Su naturaleza dispuesta captaba la salida de la prisión tan vívida y repentinamente como se había hundido repentina y pesadamente con la sensación de cautiverio. Vernon cruzó por su mente: ¡era un amigo! Sí, y un guía, pero lo desaprobaría e incluso él, si amenazaba su camino hacia la libertad sagrada, debía quedar a un lado.

¿Qué pensaría Vernon? No volverían a encontrarse, hasta donde ella sabía. O se encontrarían un día en los Alpes, una pareja de mediana edad, él famoso, ella arrepentida únicamente de haber caído por debajo de las elevadas pautas de él. «Señor Whitford», dice ella, muy seria, «habría deseado, en aquella época, me crea o no, merecer su aprobación». El ceño del fantasma de Vernon que conjuraba estaba fruncido, como lo había visto el día anterior en la biblioteca.

Se reprobó a sí misma por pensar en él cuando su mente debía estar fija en intentar aquello a lo que Vernon se habría opuesto.

Era una relajación mucho más afable pensar en la confesión avergonzada del joven Crossjay de que se le habían pegado las sábanas mientras ella daba vueltas sobre el rocío. Clara se rio de él e inmediatamente Crossjay salió por detrás de un árbol y la obligó a llevarse la mano al corazón, quedándose plantada. Una conspiradora no está hecha para soportar sorpresas. Crossjay temió haberle hecho daño y se comportó con hombría tratando de calmarla: llevaba «horas» levantado, dijo, y la había vigilado mientras venía por la avenida, sin proponerse asustarla; era la clase de broma que solía gastarle a sus compañeros y, si le había hecho daño, podía hacer con él lo que quisiera y ya vería si soportaba el castigo. Insistió en que lo castigara

corporalmente.

—Se lo dejaré a los bosquimanos cuando estés en la marina —dijo Clara.

—¡Los bosquimanos no se atreverán a azotar a un oficial! Ya se ve lo que sabe usted de la marina —dijo Crossjay.

—Pero no puedes haber salido antes que yo, niño malcriado, pues la puerta estaba cerrada cuando salí.

—Pero usted no salió por la puerta de atrás, la puerta privada de sir Willoughby; usted salió por la puerta principal y sé lo que se propone, señorita Middleton: usted no quiere pagar por lo que ha perdido.

—¿Qué he perdido, Crossjay?

—Su apuesta.

—¿Qué apuesta?

—Ya sabe.

—Habla.

—Un beso.

—Nada de eso. Pero, querido muchacho, no te quiero menos por no darte un beso. Todo eso es absurdo: solo tienes que pensar en aprender y ser sincero. No cuentes patrañas: tolera cualquier cosa antes de ser deshonesto.

Clara se mostró particularmente sensible a la estupidez y maldad de la falsedad y añadió:

—¿Me has oído?

—Sí, pero usted me besó cuando pasé todo el día bajo la lluvia.

—Porque te lo había prometido.

—Pero, señorita Middleton, usted apostó un beso ayer.

—Estoy segura, Crossjay, de que no; no diré que segura, pero ¿puedes decir que estás seguro de haber salido primero esta mañana? ¿Puedes decir que estás seguro de que, cuando saliste de la casa, no me vista en la avenida? No puedes, ¿eh?

—Señorita Middleton, creo de verdad que estaba vestido antes.

—Sé siempre sincero, mi querido muchacho, y entonces te darás cuenta de que Clara Middleton te querrá siempre.

—Pero, señorita Middleton, cuando usted se case ya no será Clara Middleton.

—Desde luego que sí, Crossjay.

—No, no lo será, porque me gusta tanto su nombre.

Clara se detuvo y dijo:

—Me lo has advertido, Crossjay, y no me casaré. Te esperaré —iba a decir, pero convirtió la vacilación en una frase:

—¿Está demasiado lejos para ti la aldea donde ayer franqueé mi carta?

Crossjay aulló despreciativo.

—Después de Clara, mi favorita es Lucy —dijo.

—Pensaba que Clara venía después de Nelson —dijo ella— y mucho después, si no vas a ser un marinero de agua dulce.

—No voy a ser un marinero de agua dulce, señorita Middleton, puede usted estar completamente segura.

—No dejas de hablar como si lo fueras, Crossjay.

—Entonces no diré nada.

Se mantuvo firme en su decisión durante todo un minuto.

Clara esperaba, en esa mañana de aventura dudosa, pero imperativa, haber hecho algún bien.

Se apresuraron a cubrir la distancia hasta la estafeta de la aldea y volver antes de la hora del desayuno y tuvieron tiempo de sobra, pues llegaron demasiado pronto para la apertura de la puerta, de manera que Crossjay empezó a bailar, hambriento, y fue enviado a asediar el horno. Clara se sintió sola sin él, aprensivamente tímida en la silenciosa calle de ventanas cerradas. Se alegró a su vuelta. Cuando al final le dieron su carta, tras comprobar el cartero que ella era la destinataria legítima, caminaron a buen paso para estar de vuelta en casa a tiempo. Clara miró ávidamente la primera página que Lucy había escrito:

—Telegrafíame y saldré a tu encuentro. Te proporcionaré todo cuanto puedas necesitar para dos noches, si no puedes quedarte más tiempo.

Esa era la clave de la carta. Una segunda mirada menos ávida durante el camino le aportó dulzura. Lucy había escrito:

—¿Si te quiero como solía? Mi querida amiga, has de ser muy infeliz si he de contestar a eso.

Clara rompió el silencio.

—Sí, querido Crossjay, si quieres podemos dar otro paseo después del desayuno. Pero, recuerda, no debes decir dónde has estado conmigo. Te daré veinte chelines para que compres esos huevos de ave y las ma-

riposas que quieras para tu colección, pero prométeme que no volverás a hacer novillos. Dile al señor Whitford que sabes lo desagradecido que eres para que pueda albergar alguna esperanza contigo. ¿Conoces el camino a través de los campos hasta la estación de ferrocarril?

—Se ahorrará una milla; tome el camino por el molino de Combline y luego hay otro atajo de cinco minutos; el resto por la carretera.

—Entonces, Crossjay, inmediatamente después del desayuno corre hasta los faisanes y me reuniré contigo allí. Si llega alguien antes que yo, di que estás admirando el plumaje del Himalaya, la hermosa ave de la India, y, si nos encuentran, echaremos una carrera y, por supuesto, me cogerás, pero no antes de que estemos fuera de la vista. Dile al señor Vernon esta noche... dile al señor Whitford esta noche que yo te había dado el dinero como parte de mi asignación. A mí me gustaba tener dinero en el bolsillo, Crossjay. Puedes decirle que yo te di el día libre y que le escribiré para excusarlo, si no es demasiado severo para dártelo. Puede ser muy severo.

—Mírelo a la cara la próxima vez, señorita Middleton. Yo pensaba que era terrible hasta que me obligó a mirarlo. Dice que los hombres deben mirarse a la cara, como hacemos nosotros cuando me da la lección, y entonces ya no reñimos ni la mitad. No recuerdo todo lo que dice.

—No estás obligado, Crossjay.

—No, pero a usted le gusta oírlo.

—No puedo acusarme, muchacho, de haberte dicho eso.

—No, pero, señorita Middleton, le gusta y a él le gusta oírla cantar y tocar el piano y la observa.

—Llegaremos tarde si nos distraemos —dijo Clara, empezando a caminar casi a la carrera.

Llegaron a tiempo al paseo del parque hasta el cerezo de doble floración, que ya no estaba tan blanco. Clara levantó la mirada hasta donde había imaginado una visión celestial más hermosa que la que cualquier otra vista de la tierra le hubiera dado. Fue cuando Vernon estaba tumbado debajo. Pero ella había mirado hacia arriba, no a él. El árbol daba algo de pena con sus flores marchitas del color de la nieve pisoteada.

Crossjay retomó la conversación.

—Dice que no le gustan mucho las señoras.

—¿Quién dice eso?

—El señor Whitford.

—¿Fueron esas sus palabras?

—He olvidado las palabras, pero dijo que nada de lo que me había enseñado me había gustado hasta que usted llegó y que, desde que usted llegó, él me gustaba diez veces más.

—Cuanto más te guste él más me gustarás tú, Crossjay.

El muchacho dio un grito y salió disparado hacia sir Willoughby, ante cuya aparición Clara se sintió encogida y retorcida por dentro. Crossjay corrió hacia él con muestras de placer. Sin embargo, no lo había mencionado durante el paseo y Clara lo consideró una señal de que el muchacho había entendido la completa satisfacción que Willoughby sentía por las muestras de afecto y obraba al respecto. Sin culpar a Crossjay, Clara criticó la escena por el motivo de las criaturas jóvenes que han dejado de amar a una persona y ansían una prueba contra ella que confirme su animadversión, que a veces, cuando esa persona no las irrita enseguida, les parece brutal, porque no pueden analizarla ni reducirla a la multitud de antagonismos de donde surge. Se había convertido, debido a una gran acumulación, en una sombría y muda carga sobre los sentidos y la prueba más reciente, la menor señal, hablaba por ella. A punto de hacer algo mal, Clara se dio cuenta enseguida y pensó en lo que había de vital y sincero en el hombre y cómo había corrompido al muchacho. Sin embargo, imitó instintivamente al muchacho al saludarlo casi efusivamente.

—Buenos días, Willoughby. No podíamos perdernos la mañana. ¿Llevas mucho tiempo fuera?

Él retuvo su mano.

—¡Mi querida Clara! Y tú, ¿no te habrás fatigado demasiado? ¿Dónde has estado?

—Dando una vuelta, ¡en todas partes! No estoy cansada, desde luego.

—¿Solos tú y Crossjay? Tendrías que haber soltado los perros.

—Su ladrido habría turbado la casa.

—Menos de lo que me turba pensar en ti sin protección.

Le besó los dedos: eran palabras de amor.

—La gente... —dijo Clara, pero no insistió en engañarlo sobre algo que no habría podido advertir.

—Si sales antes que yo otra mañana, Clara, prométeme que llevarás los perros, ¿quieres?

—Sí.

—Hoy soy todo tuyo.

—¿De veras?

—¡De la primera hora a la última! ¿Te ha gustado el humor de Horacio?

—Es muy divertido.

—Tan bueno como si lo hubiéramos contratado.

—Ahí viene el coronel De Craye.

—Debe de pensar que lo *hemos* contratado.

Clara advirtió la amargura del tono de Willoughby. Le dio los buenos días a De Craye y comentó que debía ir a los establos.

—¿Darleton? ¿Darleton, señorita Middleton? —dijo el coronel, tras saludarla—. ¿Una hija del general Darleton? Si es así, he tenido el honor de bailar con ella. ¿Usted no? Practicar con ella, quiero decir. ¿O marcharse en triunfo del baile como hacen las jóvenes? Entonces sabrá que es una pareja deliciosa.

—¡Lo es! —exclamó Clara, entusiasmada con el socorro de su amiga, cuya carta era el tesoro que albergaba su seno.

—Es curioso que no me viniera el nombre ayer, señorita Middleton. En medio de la noche sonó una campanilla de plata en mis oídos y recordé a la joven de la que medio me enamoré, aunque solo fuera por su forma de bailar. Es morena, de su altura, ligera de pies; una hermana de otro color. ¡Ahora que sé que es amiga suya!

—Vaya, podrá usted conocerla, coronel De Craye.

—Sería ofrecerle a un descastado. ¡Solo conocemos a una muchacha encantadora para enterarnos de que está comprometida! No hay un solo verso de balada, señorita Middleton, que no salga del corazón.

—Lucy Darleton... Tendré que hablar con usted seriamente, coronel De Craye.

—¿Lo hará algún día? ¡No crea que soy un saltimbanqui! Habrá oído hablar de payasos melancólicos. No encontrará la cara tan risueña tras el maquillaje. Cuando tenía trece años menos me amaron y mi querida muchacha se hundió en la tumba. Desde entonces no me he encontrado a gusto en la vida, probablemente por no haber encontrado a nadie tan caritativo como ella. Es fácil obtener sonrisas y estrechar manos, pero no es tan fácil encontrar a una mujer en la que confiar tu corazón ante el enemigo. Yo era pobre entonces. Ella dijo: Cuando cumpla veintiún años. Ese día fui a buscarla y me extrañó que no me rechazaran en la puerta. Me mostraron las escaleras y la vi, y la vi muerta. ¡Quería casarse conmigo para dejarme su fortuna!

—Entonces no se casó —dijo Clara con el aliento entrecortado.

Miró detrás de sí.

Sir Willoughby se acercaba, caminando sobre la turba.

—Tendré que ser astuta para zafarme de él después del desayuno —pensó.

Willoughby había descartado su locura de los días anteriores y podría haber replicado: «Seré un estúpido si te pierdo de vista».

Apareció Vernon, tan formal como solía últimamente. Clara se excusó por haberle quitado a Crossjay para su natación matutina. Él asintió.

De Craye le pidió a Willoughby una guía de trenes.

—Hay un mapa en la sala de fumar; a las once, uno, y a las cuatro es nuestra hora si has de irte —dijo Willoughby.

—¿Se marcha usted, coronel De Craye?

—En dos o tres días, señorita Middleton.

Clara no le pidió que se quedase: su anuncio no surtió efecto en ella. En consecuencia, pensó él... Bien, ¿qué? Nada. Bien, entonces no piensa quedarse tampoco. De otra manera habría lamentado la pérdida de una compañía divertida: esa era la exposición más modesta del asunto. Era modesta y vana por el mismo sentimiento y ambas cosas podían encontrarse simultáneamente en el mismo pecho, cada una de ellas igual de sincera; tan tímida es la vanidad del hombre en presencia de una dama. A Clara le gustaba: no le preocupaba en absoluto. ¿Cómo podía ella...? Sin embargo, le gustaba: ¡oh si pudiera serle útil de algún modo! Esas eran sus fantasías sucesivas, que llegaban hasta la exclamación, basadas en la convicción de que ella no amaba a Willoughby y a la espera de que las circunstancias se despejaran. Preguntar por la guía de trenes había sido un *impromptu,* tanto pensarlo como decirlo. Había brotado, sin saberlo él, de conjeturas a las que se había entregado en los últimos días. Esta mañana ella recibiría una respuesta a la carta que había enviado a su amiga, la señorita Lucy Darleton, la hermosa muchacha morena, a la que De Craye se sorprendía de no haber captado cuando bailó con ella. Hermosa como era, le había venido al recuerdo por el nombre y el rango de su padre, un famoso general de caballería y un gran estratega. El coronel se despreció a sí mismo por no haber sido devoto de la amiga de Clara Middleton.

Las cartas de la mañana estaban en la bandeja de bronce del vestíbulo. Clara pasó de camino a su habitación sin inspeccionarlas. De Craye abrió un sobre y subió a redactar unas líneas. Sir Willoughby se fijó en la ausencia de ambos en la solemne reunión con los sirvientes antes del desayuno. Había tres sillas vacías. Vernon tenía sus propias ideas del servicio mecánico ¡y sacaba un precioso provecho de ellas! Pero los otros dos asientos devolvieron la mirada que Willoughby había lanzado a sus espaldas con una falta de tacto que le recordó que su amigo Horacio había pedido una guía de trenes, habiendo admitido un minuto después

que se quedaría en la casa otros dos o tres días. El hombre poseído por los celos no necesita nunca motivos: magnifica; la hierba es una jungla, las colinas, montañas. Las piernas de Willoughby no paraban de cruzarse audiblemente y sus brazos ceñidos y el carraspeo de la garganta eran leves señales de su situación.

—¿Se encuentra bien esta mañana, Willoughby? —le dijo el doctor Middleton al cerrar sus volúmenes.

—Quienes me conocen íntimamente no lo cuestionan —respondió,

«¡Willoughby indispuesto!» y «¡Es la salud en persona!» exclamaron las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel.

Leticia se apenó por él. Los rayos de sol en una ciudad asolada por la peste, pensó, serían como la sonrisa en su cara. Leticia creía que amaba profundamente a Clara y se había enterado de su alienación.

Willoughby fue al vestíbulo y miró por el hueco de la escalera en busca del par de malhechores, ardiendo por lo que no podía revelar a un alma.

De Craye estaba en la habitación del ama de llaves, hablando con el joven Crossjay y la señora Montague, que estaban desayunando. Había oído parlotear al muchacho y, como la puerta estaba entreabierta, se asomó y fue invitado a entrar. A la señora Montague le gustaba mucho oírlo hablar; él le rendía el respeto familiar que una dama que ha perdido su fortuna, tras un periodo conveniente, disfruta como un recuerdo decorosamente triste, y el respeto del señor de la casa era más frío.

La señora Montague lamentaba que el muchacho pusiera a prueba su constitución con largos paseos antes de tener algo en él para pasear.

—¿Dónde has ido esta mañana, muchacho? —dijo De Craye.

—Ah usted conoce el terreno, coronel —dijo Crossjay—. «¡Tengo hambre! Tomaré tres huevos y algo de tocino, y galletas de mantequilla, y mermelada, y luego volveré a empezar con mi segunda taza de café.

—No es una jactancia —señaló la señora Montague—. No toma nada de las cinco a las nueve y luego viene a mi mesa famélico y come demasiado.

—¡Oh señora Montague! Eso es lo que la gente del campo llama romance. Coronel De Craye, a las siete he tomado un bollo. La señorita Middleton me obligó a comprarlo.

—¿Lo robaste, muchacho?

—Eso fue ayer. No había caramelo como en un bollo reciente.

—¿Dónde has dejado a la señorita Middleton cuando has ido a comprar el bollo? No debes dejar sola nunca a una dama. Las calles de una aldea rural están solitarias a esa hora temprana. Crossjay, me sorprendes.

—Ella me obligó a ir, coronel. De verdad. ¿Qué me importaba a mí un bollo? Ella estaba segura. Podíamos oír a la gente moviéndose en la estafeta y me encontré con nuestro cartero cuando iba por su saca. Yo no quería ir, ¡maldito bollo! Pero no se puede desobedecer a la señorita Middleton. No quiero hacerlo y no lo haré.

—Son iguales —dijo el coronel, y Crossjay gritó, pues la dama a quien habían elogiado estaba en la puerta.

—Estará cansada para cabalgar esta mañana —le dijo De Craye, mientras Clara bajaba las escaleras.

Clara sujetó las cintas del sombrero.

—No pienso cabalgar hoy.

—¿Por qué no me encargó a mí su misión?

—Me gusta llevar mis cargas hasta donde puedo.

—¿Está bien la señorita Darleton?

—Eso creo.

—¿Hará que se acuerde de mí?

—Probablemente su recuerdo sea tan vivaz como el suyo, coronel.

—¿La verá pronto?

—Eso espero.

Sir Willoughby se la encontró al pie de las escaleras, pero evitó darle la mano.

—Pasaremos el día juntos —dijo.

Clara asintió.

En la mesa del desayuno miró el reloj.

De Craye consultó el suyo.

—Ese reloj se retrasa cinco minutos y medio, Willoughby.

—El encargado no vino desde Rendon para ajustarlo la semana pasada, Horacio. Se le hará muy tarde cuando venga.

Una de las señoras comparó la hora de su reloj con la del de De Craye y Clara miró el suyo y advirtió agradecida que iba atrasado.

Dejó la sala del desayuno a las diez menos cuarto tras besar a su padre. Willoughby la siguió. Le tranquilizaba pensar en su ventaja personal sobre De Craye y estaba seguro de que, si podía quedarse a solas con su

excéntrica prometida y retenerla, podría, saliendo al paso de un carácter a la deriva, ser el hombre que había sido para ella no hacía tantos días. Considerando que eran muy pocos, su carácter se excitó, pero se dominó.

Estaban discutiendo ligeramente cuando De Craye salió al vestíbulo.

—Un presente digno de tenerse en cuenta —le dijo Willoughby a Clara— y no me refiero a su coste. Ven, entonces. Estoy todo el día a tu disposición. Te llevaré por la tarde a visitar a lady Busshe para darle las gracias, pero antes has de verlo. Está en el laboratorio.

—Hay tiempo antes de la tarde —dijo Clara.

—¿Regalos de boda? —se interpuso De Craye.

—Un servicio de porcelana de lady Busshe, Horacio.

—¿No en fragmentos? Déjame echarle un vistazo. Me persigue la idea de que la porcelana siempre se hace añicos. Echaré un vistazo y me conformaré. Estaremos en el laboratorio, señorita Middleton.

Puso su brazo bajo el de Willoughby. La resistencia fue momentánea: a Willoughby le satisfizo pensar que, si De Craye estaba con él, no estaría con Clara y, al verla darle órdenes a su doncella Barclay, difirió la exigencia de su compañía por un breve espacio de tiempo.

De Craye lo retuvo en el laboratorio, primero a propósito de las tazas y platillos de China y luego con las últimas noticias de Londres, cuentos de jóvenes Cupidos en aventuras subterráneas, con elevados títulos para iluminarlo. A Willoughby le gustaba el cuento iluminado de ese modo, pues sin el título no había sabor alguno especial en esos asuntos, y sonsacó lo mejor de su categoría. Su moralidad reprobaba a la dama equivocada mientras disfrutaba de los incidentes. No pudo evitar interrumpir a De Craye para señalar a Vernon a través de la puerta vidriera, que pasó a grandes zancos, evidentemente en busca del joven Crossjay.

—Nadie sabe manejar al muchacho salvo yo. Pero sigue, Horacio —dijo, refrenando su risa desdeñosa, y Vernon pareció ridículo en el exterior, medio empapado por una cortina de lluvia, de nuevo esquivado por el pequeño bribón. Parecía que estaba determinado a capturar a su fugitivo: recorrió la avenida a buen paso.

—Un hombre parece bobo saliendo al paso de una pelota de críquet, pero corriendo en una tormenta de lluvia para atrapar a un joven villano al que ha pedido de vista supera todo lo que he visto —resumió Willoughby para su diversión.

—¡Ajá! —dijo De Craye, agitando la mano para acompañar el melodioso acento—. Hay cosas más divertidas.

Había fumado en el laboratorio, por lo que Willoughby le ordenó a un sirviente que llevase el servicio de porcelana a una de las salitas para que Clara lo examinase.

—Eres osado —observó De Craye—. Sin embargo, la fortuna puede estar de tu lado. Yo no pondría en riesgo ese frágil tesoro por una minucia.

—Creo en mi suerte —dijo Willoughby.

Mandó a buscar a Clara. El señor de la casa deseaba impacientemente su presencia y tuvo que esperar. No estaba en ninguna de las estancias inferiores. Barclay, su doncella, al preguntarle, declaró que no estaba tampoco en ninguna de las superiores. Willoughby se volvió enseguida a De Craye: el coronel estaba allí.

Consultaron a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel y a la señorita Dale. No tenían nada que decir de los movimientos de Clara, salvo que entendían tanta inquietud por su parte. La idea de que estuviera a la intemperie se volvió grave: el cielo estaba negro, tronaba y los relámpagos iluminaban la lluvia. Se envió a hombres con paraguas, chales y abrigos al recinto del parque. De Craye dijo:

—Iré con ellos.

—No —gritó Willoughby, interceptándolo—. No puedo permitirlo.

—Tengo el olfato de un sabueso, Willoughby. Daré con el rastro.

—Mi querido Horacio, no te dejaré ir.

—*¡Adieu,* querido muchacho! Soy el único que puede encontrarla.

Caminó hacia el paragüero. Discutieron si Clara había cogido su paraguas. Barclay dijo que sí. El hecho indicaba un paseo más allá del parque. Crossjay tampoco estaba. De Craye cabeceó para sí mismo.

Willoughby tamborileó sobre el barómetro.

—¿Dónde está Pollington? —llamó, y envió a buscar a su sirviente Pollington para que le trajera botas de pesca y chubasqueros.

Se debatía urgentemente consigo mismo.

¿Debía ir solo para tener la oportunidad de descubrir a Clara y perdonarla bajo su paraguas y abrigo o debía impedir que De Craye fuera solo y tuviera la oportunidad de la que había presumido de una manera tan podo decorosa?

—Me ofenderás, Horacio, si insistes —dijo.

—Considérame un instrumento del destino, Willoughby —contestó De Craye.

—Entonces iremos juntos.

—Pero esa es una adición de uno que cancela al otro por conjunción y es peor que una división sencilla, pues no puedo confiar en mi ingenio salvo que lo haga a solas, como verás.

—Te doy mi palabra de que a veces hablas de un modo incomprensible, para ser franco contigo, Horacio. Sé claro.

—Tal vez no sea propio del genio del lenguaje, pues creo que he hablado claro.

—¡Oh! Es un galimatías en inglés y en irlandés.

—Y una estupidez, si a eso vamos, pues no se trata de eso.

—¿Dónde? —exclamaron las señoritas—. ¿Dónde podrá estar? La tormenta es terrible.

Leticia sugirió el embarcadero.

—Pero Crossjay no se ha bañado esta mañana —dijo De Craye.

Nadie reparó en el absurdo de que Clara hubiera pensado en llevarse a Crossjay a nadar al lago inmediatamente después del desayuno, pero aceptaron la sugerencia de que ella y Crossjay hubieran ido a remar al lago.

Con la esperanza de esa idea, Willoughby toleró que De Craye fuera sin compañía y tuviera su oportunidad. Sofocó una risita. Trazó un plan para despachar a Crossjay y quedarse en el embarcadero con Clara, complaciéndose en el prestigio que le daría buscarla y encontrarla allí. Se mezclaron sentimientos encontrados. Esperaba estar a solas con ella donde no pudiera escapársele.

Al abrir las puertas del vestíbulo se les presentó a los caballeros una imagen enmarcada de un diluvio. Los árboles que retoñaban estaban negros, sin coloración, goteando y empapados, y la canción de la lluvia era un siseo constante.

Al contemplarlo, las señoras clamaron contra Clara, incluso apostrofándola; tan oscuros son los errores triviales cuando las circunstancias se tuercen. Debía estar loca para tentar las inclemencias del tiempo; era una atolondrada, no descansaba nunca. ¡Clara! ¡Clara! ¿Cómo podías comportarte de una manera tan salvaje? ¿No deberíamos decírselo al doctor Middleton?

Leticia sugirió que se lo ahorrasen.

—¿Qué camino vas a tomar? —dijo Willoughby, más bien temeroso de no librarse ahora de su compañero.

—Cualquiera —dijo De Craye—. Lanzaré mi cabeza como una moneda y seguiré la tirada.

Ese sinsentido rabioso sacó de quicio a Willoughby. De Craye vio cómo miraba de reojo sus talones para asegurarse de que no lo seguía y pensó: «¡Por Júpiter! Está loco por ella. Pero no sabe dónde ir. Es una muchacha decidida, si no me engaño. Es una muchacha entre cien mil. Esas muchachas son la clase de esposas adecuadas para los maridos adecuados. Son las muchachas que me hacen pensar en casarme. ¡Mañana! Dame solo la oportunidad. Nos ligan más fuerte cuando lo hacen».

Pensar en el vestido estampado de Clara y en su rostro le impulsó a desear fervientemente que hubiera escapado a la tormenta.

Al preguntar al guarda del oeste del parque le dijeron que la señorita Middleton había cruzado la puerta con el señorito Crossjay, pero no la habían visto volver. El señor Vernon Whitford había pasado por allí media hora después.

—¡En busca del joven! —dijo el coronel.

La esposa y la hija del guarda conocían las chanzas del señorito Crossjay; el señor Whitford, dijeron, había preguntado por él y debía de haberlo atrapado y enviado a casa a cambiar sus ropas empapadas, pues el señorito Crossjay había vuelto y rechazado cobijarse en la garita; parecía haber llorado. Se marchó calado sobre la hierba mojada, con la cabeza baja. La opinión en la garita es que el señorito Crossjay no era feliz.

—Habrá recibido una buena riña del señor Whitford, no tengo dudas —dijo el coronel De Craye.

Madre e hija supusieron que ese era el caso y juzgaron que Crossjay era muy terco por no ir derecho a casa a cambiarse de ropa; estaba hecho una sopa.

De Craye sacó su reloj. Eran las once y diez. Si sus conjeturas eran correctas, la tormenta le habría cogido a la señorita Middleton a medio camino de su destino. Por lo que adivinaba de su carácter (conocimiento, diría), la tormenta no la habría arredrado en su expedición. En consecuencia, dedujo que en ese momento huía hacia su amiga, la morena y encantadora Lucy Darleton.

Sin embargo, como cabía la posibilidad de la lluvia hubiera sido excesiva para ella, y como no tenía otra especulación sobre la ruta que Clara había tomado, decidió seguir el camino hasta Rendon, atento a las ventanas de las casas y granjas.

XXVI

Vernon a la zaga

El guarda tenía un hijo, compinche del señorito Crossjay y camarada de muchas aventuras, pues la pasión de ese muchacho era convertirse en guardabosque y, en compañía de uno de los guardabosques más jóvenes, él y Crossjay solían recorrer el campo preparándose para una profesión deliciosa para el gusto de los tres. La relación futura de Crossjay con el misterioso océano le confirió el título de capitán por consentimiento de todos; él los dirigía y, cuando se perdía las lecciones, se encontraba por lo general con Jacob Croom o Jonathan Fernaway. Vernon se tranquilizó respecto a Crossjay cuando divisó a Jacob Croom sentado en un taburete en la garita. Juzgó que el aspecto de Jacob, leyendo atentamente un libro que él le había dado al muchacho, era toda una añagaza. Oyó sorprendido decir a madre e hija, así como a Jacob, que la señorita Middleton había cruzado la puerta antes de las diez con Crossjay a su lado, demasiado apresurados como para que este último saludara a Jacob. Que Clara, entre todos los habitantes de la tierra, alentara a Crossjay a hacer novillos resultaba increíble. Vernon tuvo que recurrir a todos los aforismos griegos y latinos sobre su sexo para creerlo.

La lluvia era universal; una espesa túnica barría todo el paisaje de colina a colina; tronaba a lo lejos y, entre la confusión y el estruendo, el aguacero caía sobre la tierra con un ruido tremendo, como si fuera engullido, parecido al de un cerdo recién comido, como si una vasta asamblea de hambrientos hubiera tomado asiento clamorosamente y caído sobre las viandas y la bebida en silencio, salvo por las mandíbulas. Un caminante ágil de temperamento poético y humorístico reúne multitudes de imágenes en su camino y la lluvia, la más pesada que podamos imaginar, es una compañía vivaz cuando el paseante decidido desdeña la incomodidad de la ropa mojada y las botas que rechinan. Las nubes cargadas de lluvia del suroeste no son plomizas durante mucho tiempo: se ciernen y se pegan firmemente a la tierra con un beso que se desborda; luego, como un halcón con plumas en el pico del pájaro que lleva en sus garras levanta la cabeza, se alzan y velan en largas líneas de agua: en cualquier momento pueden rasgar el velo y mostrar suaves nubes superiores, mostrar el sol, mostrar el cielo, verde en el límite de donde surgen, del verde de la hierba con el rocío temprano, o, a lo largo de un barrido que se disgrega por encima, la risa del cielo del más puro azul entre blancos hombros titánicos: tal vez sea una hermosa sonrisa por un rato o el más ligero interludio, pero las líneas de agua, la deriva, la carrera, la elevación, todo en una sombría forma rasgada, y la animación de las hojas de los árboles, la inclinación de las copas, las ramas partidas y los vítores del seto tenaz en lucha contra las imperfecciones, que no dejan más que una hoja a lo sumo, y esa caída, configuran una gloria de lucha agreste sin ayuda de color alguno que inflame al hombre que está a salvo de todo ello gracias a una vieja asociación con el camino, el páramo y la montaña. Aunque esté empapado, su corazón silbará, y tú, esmerado londinense que protestas, considera qué sería de ti en esa escena y con qué pasos de una nerviosa danza estarías a merced de los elementos para preservar un lugar seco en alguna parte para tu afortunada persona. La lluvia y el sol le convienen por igual a los hombres de nuestro clima y quien tenga el secreto de una intoxicación tonificante habrá de cortejar las nubes del suroeste con la sangre de un enamorado.

El temor por la señorita Middleton aumentaba la feliz inquietud de Vernon. Aparte esos temores, sentía el placer de una gaviota que sobrevuela las ráfagas de espuma de la ola. Suponía que Suiza y los Alpes tiroleses habían escondido sus cabezas para muchos días y que el impetuoso y repiqueteante suroeste era lo mejor que tenía ahora. Caía una lluvia más fina; el campo se extendía oscuramente bajo la oscilante cortina; las nubes eran como a él le gustaba verlas, grandes, aunque arrastraran las faldas. Los torrentes se contenían, pues la corriente no tenía aún toda su elevación o el ascenso que él sabía que era una de las señales de belleza, y las colinas no tenían un cinturón de vapor neblinoso.

El joven Crossjay estaba al acecho a un paso del escalón que daba al atajo de Rendon. Un vagabundo estaba sentado en la baranda.

—Así que estás ahí. ¿Qué haces? ¿Dónde está la señorita Middleton? —dijo Vernon—. Ten cuidado con lo que vas a decir.

—La señorita se ha ido a la estación, señor —dijo el vagabundo.

—¡Idiota! —rugió Crossjay, dispuesto a saltar sobre él.

—Pero ¿no es así, joven caballero? ¿Puede decir que no es así?

—Te di un chelín, asno.

—Me dio esa suma, joven caballero, para que me quedara aquí y cuidara de usted, y aquí estoy.

—¡Señor Whitford!

Crossjay apeló a su maestro y manifestó su disgusto.

—¡Cuidar de mí! ¡Como si cualquiera que me conozca pensara que me hace falta! ¿Qué clase de bestia es usted, amigo?

—La que usted quiera, joven caballero. Le he cantado todo lo que sé para mantenerlo jovial. Necesitaba consuelo. Lo necesitaba. Lloraba como un niño.

—Le he dejado cantar, como usted lo llama, para que no malsinara.

—¿Y por qué malsinaba, joven caballero? Porque tenía un abrigo que picaba en la humedad y ni una sola camisa de forro. Ni un desayuno que llevarme al estómago con un clima como este. ¡Para esto he venido a este mundo! Soy una moraleja andante. No es extraño que malsine cuando no puedo entonar el canto.

—Pero ¿por qué estás aquí sentado y empapado, Crossjay? Vuelve a casa enseguida y cámbiate. Quiero que estés listo para mí.

—Señor Whitford, lo prometo, le di un chelín a este tipo para que no molestara a la señorita Middleton.

—La señorita no habría sacado nada de este joven caballero, señor, y yo me ofrecí a guiarla a la estación, detrás de ella, a una distancia respetuosa.

—¡Como si...! ¡Perro traidor! —Crossjay le mostró los dientes al delator—. Bueno, señor Whitford, no me fié de él y me quedé a su lado; habría ido tras ella aullando sobre su abrigo y su estómago y diciendo que es una moraleja. Se lo repite a todo el mundo.

—¿Se ha ido a la estación? —dijo Vernon.

No le sacaría a Crossjay una palabra al respecto.

—¿Cuánto tiempo hace?

Vernon se dirigía en parte al vagabundo.

El vagabundo empezó a tiritar mientras daba la información de que podría hacer un cuarto de hora o veinte minutos.

—Pero ¿qué es el tiempo para mí, señor? Si comiera regularmente, llevaría un reloj en mi interior. En lugar de eso tengo reúma.

—¡Paso! —gritó Vernon y saltó el escalón.

—Eso lo pueden hacer los caballeros que duermen en una cama caliente —se quejó el vagabundo—. No tienen articulaciones.

Vernon le dio media corona, pues le había sido útil.

—Señor Whitford, déjeme ir. Puedo si usted me lo pide. Déjeme ir —le suplicó Crossjay—. No la veré...

—¡Fuera, rápido! —Vernon lo detuvo y se marchó.

Oía al vagabundo y a Crossjay. Crossjay rechazaba el consuelo del triste profesional.

Vernon cruzó los campos, consultando su reloj para alcanzar la estación de Rendon a las once menos diez, aunque sin cuestionarse con claridad la naturaleza de la decisión que lo llevaba allí. Dejando el camino, tenía mejor apoyo que la superficie resbaladiza y corrió. Toda su esperanza era que Clara se hubiera extraviado. Otro aguacero le hizo temer por ella. ¿Soportaría ella irse? ¡Más de tres horas sentada en un vagón de tren con los pies mojados!

Estrechó los visionarios pies para calentarlos en su pecho. Aunque la obstinada fatuidad de Willoughby merecía el golpe, ni ella ni su padre merecían el escándalo. Clara estaba desesperada. ¿Sería asequible al razonamiento? Si no, ¿qué haría? Vernon no sabía nada. El día anterior había hablado con vehemencia con Willoughby para pedirle que facilitara la partida de Clara y le diera tiempo para pensar, y había dejado a su primo convencido de que lo mejor que podía hacer Clara era huir: un hombre tan taimado, con una fingida torpeza respaldada por un orgullo insensible, con trucos mezquinos que brotaban de una humillante tiranía, solo podía aprender mediante hechos.

La forma que había tenido Clara de tratarlo últimamente, sin embargo, había sido muy extraña; tan extraña que se habría conocido mejor a sí mismo si hubiera reflexionado en el límite que lo había llevado a una grave sospecha. De Craye había dado a conocer al mundo que dejaba la casa. ¿Estaban de acuerdo? La idea le golpeó el corazón con más frialdad que si sus húmedos pies hubieran estado allí.

Que Vernon exonerase completamente a Clara por haber hecho de él un confidente no extendía su lenidad al carácter de la joven cuando estaba en cuestión que hubiera hecho lo mismo con un segundo caballero. Podía sospechar muchas cosas; podía incluso esperar encontrarse con De Craye en la estación.

Esa idea lo asaltó durante su carrera y meditó sobre el papel que debía desempeñar. El pequeño doctor Corney pasaba en calesa hacia Rendon y lo detuvo, y le dio a su figura sombría lo más parecido a un abrazo irlandés en forma de un asiento seco bajo un paraguas y un chubasquero.

—Aunque esto es lo peor que puedo hacer por usted si declina complementarlo con una dosis de brandy caliente y agua en Dolphin —dijo el doctor— y veré por que se lo tome, si le parece bien. Tengo que ayudar a un paciente de Rendon a salir de este mundo La medicina es una de sus supersticiones, a la que se aferran

más cuanto más inútil resulta. Una píldora y un sacerdote lo harán feliz entre los dos. ¿Qué hay en tu conciencia, Pat? Si su bendición, reverencia, no casa con otra gota. Pon el caballo delante de la carreta, hijo mío, y tendrás a los dos en armonía, y Dios te guíe. ¿Estación de Rendon, decía, Vernon? Tendrá mi prescripción en la sección de ferrocarril, si se apresura. Tiene todo el aspecto. ¿De qué se trata? ¿Puedo ayudarle?

—No, y no pregunte.

—Es usted como el granadero irlandés que tenía una bala en una situación humillante. Ahí está Rendon y la atravesaremos con estrépito. Aquí está la calesa del doctor Corney de nuevo. Pues ¡nadie se muere sin él y el arrepentimiento ronda el lecho de muerte por no haberlo llamado antes! Media carga de patrañas no lastima a nadie, amigo Vernon, si su disparo surte efecto. Sea tierno con él o ella, especialmente con ella. Ahí va el meteórico doctor, que atrae a las narices a las ventanas, ya verá, lo que me recuerda a la joven más dulce que haya visto y al hombre más afortunado. ¿Cuándo tendrá su ajuar nupcial? ¿Cuándo se unen? No la llamaré perfección, pues eso es un poste difícil de mover. Pero es una ramita del árbol más cercano. Falta la poesía que hable de ella. Soy irlandés e inflamable, supongo, pero no he visto nunca a una muchacha que le haga comprender a un hombre todo el significado sagrado de la palabra cautivadora, como esa muchacha. ¡Y allá va! ¡Ni una palabra más! Pero usted es griego, amigo Vernon. ¿No le da ella una idea de ser la hija de una diosa casquivana?

—El diablo le lleve, Corney, déjeme aquí. Llegaré tarde al tren —dijo Vernon, poniendo la mano sobre el brazo del doctor para detenerlo a la vista de la estación.

El doctor Corney tenía una inteligencia celta para el significado subyacente en una lengua ilógica. Hizo una observación:

—Dos minutos de carrera no le harán daño.

Imaginó levemente que podría haber sido ofensivo, aunque conocía bien a Vernon y le estrechó las manos al despedirse.

La verdad sea dicha, Vernon no podía soportar una palabra más de un irlandés. El doctor Corney había tenido éxito en persuadirlo de que no sería extraño que a Clara Middleton le gustara el coronel De Craye.

XXVII

En la estación de ferrocarril

CLARA estaba en la sala de espera contemplando los raíles de la vía barrida por la lluvia. Sus labios se abrieron al ver a Vernon.

—¿Tiene su billete? —dijo Vernon.

Ella asintió y respiró hondo. La pregunta era tranquilizadora.

—Está empapada —prosiguió Vernon, y no podía negarse.

—Un poco. No lo siento.

—Debo pedirle que venga a la posada: media docena de pasos. Veremos la señal de su tren. Venga.

Clara pensó que era sorprendentemente autoritario, pero Vernon tenía sentido común y, deprimida como estaba por la humedad, se mostró dispuesta a ceder a la razón si él respetaba su independencia. Se sometió exteriormente, pero en su interior se resistió, atenta a detenerlo en cualquier intento de tomar una dirección decisiva.

—¿Seguro que veremos la señal, señor Whitford?

—Me encargaré de eso.

Habló con el empleado de la estación y la llevó al camino.

—¿Está completamente sola, señorita Middleton?

—Lo estoy: no he traído a mi doncella.

—Debe quitarse las botas y las medias enseguida y dejar que se sequen. La pondré a usted en manos de la posadera.

—Pero ¡mi tren!

—Tiene quince minutos, además de buenas razones para el retraso.

Parecía razonable, lo contrario de hostil, a pesar de su aire de mando, y no era desagradable en alguien que simpatizaba con su aventura. Reprimió su desconfianza y se puso en manos de la posadera, pues sus pies estaban húmedos y fríos y las faldas de su vestido embarradas; al inspeccionarse, fue objeto de escalofrío y agradeció que Vernon no hubiera prestado atención a su aspecto.

Vernon pidió la dosis del doctor Corney y lo condujeron escaleras arriba hasta una sala llena de retratos, donde los ancestros y la familia del posadero se sentaban contra las paredes, planos en sus óleos como las hierbas en la carpeta de un botánico, aunque la corpulencia era un rasgo insistente y había un formidable batallón de senos entre las mujeres. Todos ellos tenían el aspecto de la energía nacional que ha removido obstáculos para garantizar su ideal. Todos miraban fijamente al invitado. «¡Bebe y llegarás a esto!», podría haber sido lo que dijera la etiqueta. Estaba en el Walhalla privado de una amplia clase de sus paisanos. El anfitrión actual había previsto formar parte de ellos en su juventud, en el centro, fresco y plano, alegre por la ejecución. A cada lado un hijo lo empujaría mientras él ponía por debajo a su padre, según los modales de la energía.

No debemos ser críticos de nuestras obras de arte con atuendos incómodos. Vernon se volvió de los retratos a un lucio conservado en cristal y puso toda su simpatía en el pez como refugio.

Clara se le unió enseguida, diciendo:

—Pero también usted ha de estar empapado. No lleva paraguas. Debe de estar completamente empapado, señor Whitford.

—Hoy lo estamos todos —dijo Vernon—. Crossjay completamente empapado y un vagabundo con el que se encontró.

—¡Ese hombre horrible! Pero Crossjay debió volver cuando se lo dije. ¿No puede el posadero ayudarle a usted? Usted no está pendiente de la hora. Le pedí a Crossjay que volviera cuando empezó a llover; cuando arreció lo obligué. ¿Así que se encontró con el pobre Crossjay?

—No lo culpe por traicionarla. El vagabundo lo hizo. Caí sobre su rastro por accidente. Perdóneme por usar la autoridad y no se alarme, señorita Middleton: es usted completamente libre conmigo; pero su salud no debe correr riesgos. Me encontré con el doctor Corney y prescribió brandy caliente y agua para una piel húmeda; especialmente si estamos sentados. Está ahí, sobre la mesa; ya he visto que se ha dado cuenta del olor; debe acceder a tomar un sorbo, como medicina, solo para entrar en calor.

—Imposible, señor Whitford; no podría saborearlo. Pero le ruego que obedezca al doctor Corney si se lo ordenó.

—No puedo si no lo hace usted.

—Entonces lo intentaré.

Cogió el vaso, lo intentó y se quedó perpleja con el olor.

—Inténtelo; usted puede hacerlo todo —dijo Vernon.

—¡Ahora que me ha encontrado, señor Whitford! Todo por mí misma, al parecer, y nada para salvar a un amigo. Pero lo intentaré.

—Ha de ser un buen trago.

—Lo intentaré. ¿Se acabará usted el vaso?

—Con su permiso, si no deja usted demasiado.

Tenían que beber del mismo vaso y ella tenía que beber algo de ese infame brebaje y estaba en una especie de hotel a solas con él y él estaba empapado tras haber corrido tras ella: ¡todo esto por independizarse una hora!

—¡Oh qué desgracia que haya hecho este día, señor Whitford!

—¿No había escogido el día?

—El clima no.

—Lo peor es que Willoughby caerá sobre Crossjay, calado hasta los huesos, y no le sonsacará nada salvo evasivas y mentiras, y acabará por tirarlo de casa.

Clara bebió enseguida y más de lo que había previsto. Sujetó el vaso como si fuera un enemigo del que librarse, carraspeó, insegura de su aliento.

—¡No vuelva a pedirme que soporte algo así!

—No es probable que vuelva a huir de su padre ni de sus amigos.

Seguía jadeante por el fiero brebaje que se había tomado y se asombró de que desmintiera su reputación al no fortificarla, aunque la hiciera dolorosamente susceptible a sus observaciones.

—Señor Whitford, no necesito tratar de saber lo que piensa de mí.

—¿Lo que pienso? No pienso nada. Deseo serle útil si puedo.

—¿Estoy en lo cierto al suponer que está preocupado por mí? No debería estarlo. No he engañado a nadie. Le he abierto a usted mi corazón y no me avergüenza haberlo hecho.

—Es una costumbre excelente, dicen.

—No es una costumbre en mi caso.

Vernon estaba afectado y, por esa razón, insatisfecho consigo mismo, no era reacio a herir.

—Tenemos nuestra oportunidad, señorita Middleton. No soy un héroe, soy un mal conspirador y no sirvo de mucho.

—Ha sido usted reservado, pero me voy y dejo mi carácter detrás. Me ha condenado usted a la copa de veneno; no la ha probado.

—*In vino veritas* . Si lo hago diré lo que pienso.

—Hágalo, por bien de la mente y del cuerpo.

—No serían complementarios.

—Puede ser severo. Dígalo todo.

—¿Tenemos tiempo?

Miraron su reloj.

—Seis minutos —dijo Clara.

Vernon se había quedado inmóvil, calado hasta los huesos.

Ella se lo reprochó a sí misma. Él se rio para calmarla.

—Mis *dies solemnes* suelen ser una inmersión. Estoy acostumbrado. En cuanto al reloj, me recuerda que se detuvo cuando usted se fue.

Ella le acercó el vaso. Estaba más feliz y esperaba algo de severidad y de amabilidad mezcladas que pudiera llevar consigo en el viaje y en las cuales pudiera pensar.

Vernon volvió el vaso que ella le había dado, le dio la vuelta al ponerlo en sus labios: una maniobra apenas perceptible, salvo que ella se lo había dado expresamente por un lado.

Podía esperarse que no fuera a propósito. Aunque fuera accidental, sin ardid alguno, fue penoso verlo y obligó a Clara a encogerse y ruborizarse.

Los fugitivos están expuestos a extraños incidentes; no son barcos fondeados a salvo en un puerto. Clara cerró los labios como si le quemaran. La perspicaz sensibilidad de su naturaleza la acusó de una falta de color. ¡Y el hombre que la había hecho sentirse así era tan formal como un revisor de tren en el andén!

—Ahora ya hemos bebido los dos de la copa de veneno —dijo Vernon—. Y tiene el sabor del veneno repugnante, lo confieso. Pero el doctor lo prescribió y en el mar hemos de ser marineros. Ahora, señorita Middleton, el tiempo apremia. ¿Volverá conmigo?

—¡No! ¡No!

—¿Dónde se propone ir?

—A Londres, con una amiga, la señorita Darleton.

—¿Le ha dejado un mensaje a su padre?

—Le he dejado una carta en una carta que le será entregada a usted.

—A mí. ¿Le ha dejado un mensaje a Willoughby?

—Mi doncella Barclay le dará en mano una carta a mediodía.

—Ha sellado usted el destino de Crossjay.

—¿Qué?

—En este momento lo estarán interrogando. Adivinará sus respuestas. La carta lo dejará expuesto y Willoughby no perdona.

—Lo lamento. No puedo evitarlo. ¡Pobre muchacho! ¡Mi querido Crossjay! No sé cómo lo castigará Willoughby. He sido desconsiderada. Señor Whitford, destinaré mi dinero a su educación. Más tarde, cuando yo sea un poco mayor, podré encargarme de él.

—Eso es una carga; no debería obligarse a llevarla. Usted es inalterable, desde luego, pero las circunstancias no, y las mujeres están más sometidas a ellas que nosotros.

—Pero ¡yo no lo estaré!

—Que usted las domine puede verse ahora.

—¿Porque he decidido ser libre?

—No, porque hace lo contrario; no decide; huye de la dificultad y deja que su padre y sus amigos carguen con ella. En cuanto a Crossjay, ya ve que destruye una de sus oportunidades. Me lo habría llevado antes si no hubiera juzgado prudente mantenerlo en buenos términos con Willoughby. Dejemos a Crossjay aparte. Se comportará como un hombre de honor, imitando a otros que han tenido que hacer lo mismo por las damas.

—Diciendo falsedades para encubrir cobardes, quiere decir, señor Whitford. ¡Oh! Ya sé. No tengo más que dos minutos. La suerte está echada. No puedo volver. Debo darme prisa. ¿Me acompaña a la estación? Debería usted apresurarse en volver a casa.

—La acompañaré hasta el final. Esperemos aquí. Un expreso va por delante de su tren y le he pedido al empleado que me haga una señal. Tengo un ojo en la ventana.

—Sigue siendo usted mi mejor amigo, señor Whitford.

—Aunque...

—Aunque no entienda del todo los tormentos que me han traído hasta aquí.

—¿Arrastrada por el viento y la marea?

—¡Ah no lo entiende!

—¿Misterios?

—Los sufrimientos no son misterios; son simplemente hechos.

—Entonces no lo entiendo. Pero decídase. Querría que su albedrío fuera libre.

Clara salió de la habitación.

Medias y botas secas son mejores para viajar que las mojadas, pero, a pesar de su decisión, al ponérselas se sintió como si hubiera tropezado. La meta era deseable, el ardor se había enfriado. El deseo de Vernon de que su albedrío fuera libre la obligó a sondearlo y, desde luego, quería irse, liberarse, expulsar al íncubo... ¿Herir a su padre? ¿Hacerle daño a Crossjay? ¿Disgustar a sus amigos? ¡No y diez veces no!

Volvió enseguida con Vernon para evitar el reflejo de sí misma.

Vernon estaba atento a un carruaje cerrado en la puerta de la estación.

—¿Hemos de apresurarnos, señor Whitford?

—No hay ninguna señal. Aquí no hace frío.

—Me atreví a introducir la carta para papá en la suya confiando en que usted atendería mi petición de darle la noticia intercediendo por mí.

—Haré todo cuanto esté en mi mano.

—Estoy condenada a irritar a cuantos se preocupan por mí. He tratado de seguir su consejo.

—Primero habló conmigo y luego con la señorita Dale; al final ha aclarado su conciencia.

—No.

—¿Cuál es la carga?

—No he hecho nada para merecer esa carga.

—Entonces ¿no tiene claras las cosas?

—No.

Vernon se encogió de hombros. Nuestra paciencia con una inocente duplicidad en las mujeres se mide por el lugar que nos asigna a nosotros y a los demás. Vernon podría haber pensado si hubiera querido: «Usted no ha hecho más que meditar sobre una conciencia turbada». Eso era evidente y lo que había dicho Cla-

ra era una prueba de su disposición. No la ayudaría. La sangre del hombre, que es el vínculo con las mujeres y la que responde al instante a favor o en contra, lo oscurecía. Volvió a encogerse de hombros cuando ella dijo:

—Mi carácter se habría degradado quedándome allí. ¿Podía usted aconsejarlo?

—Desde luego no la degradación de su carácter —dijo, sombrío a propósito de De Craye, sin que lo aliviaran lo sentimientos, de los que era agudamente sensible, de ser un mendigo dependiente o convertirse en un escritorzuelo aventurero.

—¿Por qué me ha seguido y quería detenerme, señor Whitford? —dijo Clara con el acicate de una herida en el tono.

Vernon contestó:

—Supongo que soy un entrometido. No había sido consciente de ello hasta ahora.

—Es usted mi amigo. Solo que demasiado irónico. Era ironía lo de haber aclarado mi conciencia. Hablé con usted y con la señorita Dale y luego me relajé y quedé a la deriva. ¿No se da cuenta de que mencionarlo es como un horno ardiente? Willoughby ha atrapado a papá. Planea incesantemente atraparme a mí. Huyo de su astucia más que de ninguna otra cosa a la que tema. Ya le he dicho que soy más culpable que él, pero he de acusarlo. ¡Los regalos de boda! ¡Las felicitaciones! ¡Ser su invitada!

—Todo eso constituye un alegato para mitigarlo.

—¿No es suficiente para usted? —preguntó Clara tímidamente.

—Tiene usted un buen sentido masculino que le dice que no será respetada si huye. Tres días más allí podrían cubrirle la retirada con su padre.

—¡No me escuchará! Me confunde; Willoughby lo ha embrujado.

—Déjelo en mis manos: yo procuraré que la escuche.

—¿Y volver? ¡Oh no! ¡A Londres! Además, esta tarde está la cena con la señora Mountstuart, y me gusta mucho, pero debo evitarla. Profesa una especie de idolatría... ¿Qué respuestas puedo dar? Le he suplicado con las miradas. Ella las observa, mis esfuerzos por evitar que sean penosas causan en ella una expresión cómica y soy una *pícara* encantadora y me entretiene con el tema que ella supone que más me interesa. Debo evitarla. Pensar en ella no me deja opción. Es inteligente. Podría tatuarme con epigramas.

—Quédese: podrá defenderse.

—Me dijo que usted me concedía una pizca de ingenio. No he descubierto mi posesión. Hemos hablado de ello; podríamos considerarlo una desilusión para usted. Ella me concede alguna belleza; debe de ser la suya.

—No hay desilusión en ninguno de los dos casos, señorita Middleton. Tiene usted belleza e ingenio; la opinión pública dirá que salvaje; le cargarán con la indiferencia a su reputación y sus amigos tendrán que aceptarlo. Pero usted superará *esa* dificultad.

—¡Ah! ¿Para enfrentarme a otra?

—Es imposible juzgarlo hasta que veamos cómo escapa a la primera. No tengo más que decir. Quiero a su padre. Su estilo sentencioso y sus zancos doctorales son una máscara en la que se complace, pero usted lo conoce y no los teme. Si se sentara usted una hora con él a trabajar con el latín, y le cogiera de la mano y le dijera que no puede abandonarlo, ¡sin lágrimas! Respondería enseguida. Supondría un día o dos más; sería desagradable para usted, sin duda; pero preferible a este modo de escapar, creo. Pero yo no tengo poder alguno para persuadir. No tengo la *lengua de las damas* . Apelo siempre a la razón.

—Eso es un cumplido. Aborrezco la *lengua de las damas* .

—Es un don distintivamente bueno y me gustaría tenerlo. Podría haber tenido éxito en lugar de fracasar y dar la impresión de estar haciendo cumplidos.

—Seguramente el expreso se retrasa, señor Whitford.

—El expreso ya ha pasado.

—Entonces hemos de cruzar.

—Es mejor que no la vea la señora Mountstuart. Ese es su carruaje, en la estación, y ella está dentro.

Clara miró y, con el corazón encogido, dijo:

—¡Tendré que enfrentarme a ella!

—En ese caso me despediré de usted aquí, señorita Middleton.

Ella le dio la mano.

—¿Por qué la señora Mountstuart está hoy en la estación?

—Supongo que habrá venido a recoger a alguno de sus invitados. Le prometieron a su padre que vendría el profesor Crooklyn y tal vez haya venido con el expreso.

—¡Volver a la casa! —exclamó Clara—. ¿Cómo podría? No puedo más. Si tuviera algún apoyo. Podría ayudarme la sensación de hacer las cosas mal en secreto. Estoy atrapada. No puedo hacer nada bien, haga lo que haga. Solo pienso en salvar a Crossjay. Sí, y en ahorrarle a papá el disgusto. Adiós, señor Whitford.

Recordaré con gratitud su amabilidad. No puedo volver.

—¿No lo hará? —dijo Vernon, tratando de hacerla dudar.

—No.

—Pero si la señora Mountstuart la ve, tendrá que volver. Haré lo que pueda para alejarla. Si la ve, tendrá que inventarse una historia y que ella se la crea. Creo que eso es imperativo.

—No me importa —dijo Clara.

Vernon se despidió apresuradamente y se retiró. Tras su confesión, peculiar en ella, de que podría encontrar apoyo en hacer las cosas mal en secreto, que se fuera o se quedara le pareció escoger entre dos males y, mientras Clara especulaba sobre la razón que le había llevado a seguirla —lo que no era evidente—, él recordaba el miedo especial que lo había incitado y en ese punto le hizo justicia a Clara por haberle preguntado por ello. Tal vez lo hubiera hecho para salvarla del frío: ese era el único consuelo de Vernon. También se había comportado como un hombre de honor, sin sacar ventaja de la situación de Clara; pero al reflexionar al respecto recordaba su sorprendente timidez. El estricto hombre de honor desempeña un papel en el que no debería reflexionar hasta que cayera el telón; de otro modo es probable que sintiera de vez en cuando el escalofrío de la estupidez por su buena conducta.

XXVIII

La vuelta

OBSERVANDO desde un extremo de la ventana, Clara vio a Vernon cruzar la calle hasta el carruaje de la señora Mountstuart, transformado en la imagen más escueta de sí mismo por los hombros encogidos y el cuello de la chaqueta subido. Tenía un aire de decir «Tom está resfriado» que hizo que a Clara se le erizase la piel.

Vernon dejó el carruaje y fue a la estación. Había sonado una campana. ¿Era su tren? Vernon aprobaba que fuera, pues iba a ayudarla a irse: un proceder que difería de muchas de las cosas que había dicho, pero Vernon estaba tan lleno de contradicciones ese día como suele acusarse a las mujeres de estarlo. Llegó el tren. Ella tembló: no había habido ninguna señal y Vernon debía de haberla engañado.

Vernon volvió; entró en el carruaje y las ruedas se pusieron en marcha. Inmediatamente después pasó el calesín de Flitch, que llevaba al coronel De Craye.

¡Vernon no podía haberlo visto!

Pero ¿qué era lo que traía al coronel a este lugar? La opinión de Vernon seguía presionándola y frustraba sus esfuerzos por afirmar su perfecta inocencia, aunque ella sabía que no había hecho nada para atraer al coronel hasta allí. Salvo Willoughby, el coronel era la última persona a la que habría querido encontrar.

Temía oír la campana que le dijera que Vernon no la había engañado y que no estaba en sus manos, sino en las manos de otro.

Se golpeó la mano con el guante; miró a los concentrados ojos de los retratos de familia del posadero, que miraban todos por igual; advirtió el vaso vacío, le dio vueltas y lo tocó, y la cucharita que había dentro.

¡Entregarnos a la desesperación nos lanza a extrañas distancias!

Vernon le había preguntado si estaba sola. Relacionando esa pregunta, singular en sí misma, y singular en su manera de plantearla, con el vaso de líquido ardiente, Clara repitió «¡Tiene que haber visto al coronel De Craye!», y miró el vaso vacío como algo que testificaba algo, pues Vernon no era el caballero dúctil que no dejaba de sonreír galantemente ante los lugares comunes. Pero todas las puertas no están abiertas en la conciencia de una joven, por dispuesta que sea; algunas están cerradas y sin llave, otras no se abren y otras están defendidas por fantasmas en su interior. Podía no haber dicho qué era lo que testificaba. Aunque nosotros, por azar, sepamos más, no tenemos derecho a ponerlo por delante de lo que ella sabía. El olor del vaso era odioso; la hacía desgraciada. Tuvo el impulso de guardarse la cucharilla en el bolsillo de recuerdo, para mostrársela a sus nietas como advertencia. Incluso el preludio de la moraleja que dejaría caer en la ocasión le brotó en los labios: «Esta, queridas, es una cuchara que os avergonzaría usar en vuestras tazas de té; sin embargo, me fue de más valor en un periodo de mi vida que el oro y la plata...». La conclusión era vaga, como la concepción; Clara tenía su idea.

Con ese estado de ánimo bajó las escaleras y se encontró con el coronel De Craye en la estación.

La brillante iluminación de su rostro fue la del hombre confiado que confirma una conjetura arriesgada en la crisis de la duda y la discusión.

—¡Señorita Middleton!

Predominó su sorpresa jovial: el orgullo de un expulsado experto, y añadió:

—¿Llego tarde para serle útil?

Ella le agradeció el ofrecimiento.

—¿Ha despedido el calesín, coronel De Craye?

—Estaba obteniendo cambio para pagar al señor Flitch. Me recogió en el camino. Se cruza en nuestros destinos, es una certeza. Solo tengo que saltar; lo sé y todo irá sobre ruedas, como un mago dándole órdenes a un genio.

—¿Me han...?

—No con seriedad, nadie dudaba de que estuviera al abrigo. ¿Me permitirá protegerla? Mi tiempo es suyo.

—Estaba pensando en rendir una visita a mi amiga la señorita Darleton.

—¿Puedo atreverme? Imaginaba que usted quería ver a la señorita Darleton hoy. No puede hacer el viaje sin escolta.

—Por favor, retenga el calesín. ¿Dónde está Willoughby?

—Se ha puesto unas grandes botas. ¿No puedo, señorita Middleton? No me perdonaría que me rechaza-

ra.

—¿Han salido a buscarme?

—Algunos gritos. ¿Por qué me rechaza? Además, no necesito el calesín; caminaré si me destierra. Flitch es un conjurado maravilloso, pero le faltará virtud durante las próximas veinticuatro horas. Será una oportunidad para saludar a la señorita Darleton.

—Es rigurosa con las convenciones, coronel De Craye.

—Apareceré delante de ella como un ignorante o un rebelde, según sea la cuerda que le guste más. La recuerdo. Me impresionó mucho.

—¡Habla de memoria!

—La memoria no estuvo a mi disposición al mencionarse por primera vez el nombre de la dama. Como el general dice de su munición y transporte, ¡ahí está el ejército! Pero hay leguas a retaguardia. Como el criado que se va a dormir al oler fuego en la casa, yo estaba pensando en otras cosas. Así seré olvidado, si lo soy. Tengo curiosidad por saber algo, un resto de mi vanidad. No es eso exactamente; un deseo de comprobar la impresión que le causé a su amiga. ¿Ninguna? Cualquier guijarro extiende su onda.

—Eso no es una impresión —dijo Clara, mitigando su irresolución con esta charla ligera.

—¡Lo más que hombres como yo pueden esperar! ¿Tengo su permiso? Un minuto, sacaré mi billete.

—No —dijo Clara.

—Su sirviente se lo suplica.

Clara dio a entender una negativa firme con la cabeza, pero sus ojos estaban soñolientos. Respiraba con dificultad: lo que había hecho cortaba la cuerda. La invadió una sensación de languidez.

De Craye dio un paso. Se le acercó uno de los mozos. Un caballero había pedido el calesín de Flitch. Un anciano y corpulento caballero, quejándose del equipaje, apareció en el andén.

—El caballero puede quedárselo —dijo De Craye, dándole a Flitch su dinero.

—Abra la puerta —le dijo Clara a Flitch.

Flitch tiró de la manivela con entusiasmo. La puerta se abrió y ella dio un paso.

—Entonces, sube al pescante y me pondré a tu lado —exclamó De Craye, una vez que la pasión de una sorpresa penosa hubo alterado sus rasgos.

Clara le indicó el asiento delante de ella; De Craye dijo que le era indiferente la humedad; ella dejó la puerta abierta. Su temperamento habría preferido el azote del tiempo airado. La invitación era demasiado dulce.

Clara oyó entonces la campana de su tren. Al pasar junto al andén se encontró con el tren: dieciocho minutos tarde según su reloj. No habría podido decir, cuando la locomotora soltó sus chorros de vapor como una ballena, por qué no estaba en él. Había obrado con libre albedrío: eso podía decir. Vernon no la había inducido a quedarse; con seguridad su compañía actual tampoco y todo su corazón estaba puesto en la huida; sin embargo volvía a la casa solariega, no desprovista de calma. Había especulado lo suficiente sobre la circunstancia para considerarse a sí misma incomprensible y ahí se quedó, pendiente de la escena con Willoughby.

—He de escoger un día mejor para ir a Londres —observó.

De Craye asintió, pero sin quitarle los ojos de encima.

—Señorita Middleton, usted no confía en mí.

Ella contestó:

—Diga de qué modo. Me parece que lo hago.

—¿Puedo hablar?

—Si depende de mi autoridad.

—¿Plenamente?

—Lo que tenga que decir. Déjeme estipular que no sea demasiado serio. Necesito jovialidad con este tiempo húmedo.

—Señorita Middleton, Flitch es nuestro auriga una vez más. Piense en ello. Hay una marea que lo lleva perpetuamente al lugar de donde fue expulsado y un hilo que nos ata a él en continuidad. No tengo el honor de ser un amigo muy antiguo; aventuraré mi devoción: mi amistad data del primer momento en que la vi a usted. La culpa es de Flitch, si es de alguien. Tal vez se rompa el encanto si vuelve a su antiguo oficio.

—Tal vez —dijo Clara, no con la mejor de sus sonrisas. Le pareció que el implacable orgullo de Willoughby iba a recibir un golpe de rebote y eso le pareció completamente justo.

—Me temo que está en lo cierto. El pobre no ha tenido oportunidad —prosiguió De Craye. Se detuvo, como si lo hiciera por decoro en presencia de la desgracia, y se rio alegremente.

—¡Salvo que lo contrate yo o lo intente! Creo verdaderamente que la melancólica persona de Flitch en los alrededores de la casa completa la imagen del Edén en su interior. ¿Por qué no deposita en mí algo de confianza, señorita Middleton?

—Pero ¿por qué no iba usted a tratar de contratarlo, coronel De Craye?

—Lo pensaremos, si usted quiere. ¿Confiará en mí al respecto?

—Para cualquier acto de amabilidad desinteresada, seguro.

—¿Seguro?

—Sin reservas. Puede usted hablar públicamente de llevárselo a Londres.

—Señorita Middleton, precisamente donde se dirigía usted. Mi llegada le hizo cambiar de opinión. ¿Desconfía de mí y debo sorprenderme? La sorpresa sería lo contrario. No ha tenido informes míos que la persuadan de confiar, ni siquiera en un caso extremo. Adivino dónde se dirigía usted. Me preguntará cómo. No puedo decirlo. Por lo que llaman simpatía, y eso es inexplicable. Hay una simpatía natural y una antipatía natural. La gente tiene que convivir para descubrir lo profunda que es.

Clara manifestó su muda admisión de esa verdad.

El calesín dio un tumbo y amenazó con volcar.

—¡Flitch! ¡Hombre! —se quejó el coronel—. Vaya —le dijo a Clara, a quien había hecho sonreír su apóstrofe a Flitch—, no estamos seguros con él, creamos lo que creamos; se me va a salir el corazón. Pero si dos de nosotros no tienen la desgracia de estar unidos cuando lo descubren, hay esperanza. Esto es, si uno tiene valor y el otro sabiduría. De otro modo acabarán en el yugo a pesar de sí mismos. El gran enemigo es el orgullo, que los mantiene encerrados en una calesa y los conduce hasta la puerta fatal y lo único que puede hacer es sacarlo de allí mientras no haya un minuto que perder. Como no es un orgullo semejante al orgullo de la posesión, la herida mortal es hacer que dude. El orgullo no adquirirá sabiduría de otro modo. Pero ¡hemos de tener valor para ello!

De Craye jugueteó con el pestillo de la ventana para darle tiempo a sus palabras a disolverse.

¿Quién, si no Willoughby, representaba el orgullo? ¿Quién, llevada por la languidez, había soñado con un método que fuera el más seguro y rápido para enseñarle la sabiduría de rendirse a ella?

—Ya sabe, señorita Middleton, estudio el carácter —dijo el coronel.

—Ya veo que lo hace —respondió ella.

—¿Se propone volver?

—¡Oh! Resueltamente.

—Debo decir que el día no favorece el viaje.

—Así es.

—Puede contar con toda mi discreción. Me entrego a su generosidad cuando le aseguro que no era mi propósito descubrir un secreto. Conjeturé la estación y fui allí para ponerme a su disposición.

—Por azar —dijo Clara, enrojeciendo levemente—, ¿se fijó en el carruaje de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson cuando llegó a la estación?

De Craye había pasado junto a un carruaje.

—No vi a la dama. ¿Estaba allí?

—Sí. Por eso es mejor ser discretos. Podemos dar por hecho que ella lo vio a usted.

—Pero ¿no a usted, señorita Middleton?

—Prefiero pensar que me ven. Me ajusto a una descripción del valor, coronel De Craye, cuando me obligan a ello.

—No he sospechado lo contrario. El valor necesita adiestramiento, igual que otras hermosas capacidades. El mío suele oxidarse y padecer de reúma.

—No puedo oír hablar de ocultar o tramar.

—¡Salvo en defensa del pobre Flitch!

—Será una excepción.

El coronel giró la cabeza para mirar la espalda del cochero.

—¡Perfectamente garantizada hoy! —dijo del aspecto de solidez de Flitch—. Parece que la convulsión de los elementos mantiene sobrio a nuestro amigo. Solo es peligroso en calma. En cinco minutos estaremos en las puertas del parque.

Clara se inclinó hacia delante para contemplar los setos en la vecindad de la casa, que renovaban de una manera extraña su familiaridad con ella. En pensamiento y en sensación era como una flor pegada a la tierra y agradecía que su máscara femenina no mostrase lo apática y lánguida que estaba. Podía acusar a Vernon de una astucia traicionera por haberle impuesto que su libre albedrío decidiera su destino.

Suspiró involuntariamente.

—Hay un tren a las tres —dijo De Craye, con una espléndida prontitud.

—Sí, y otro a las cinco. Cenamos con la señora Mountstuart esta noche. ¡Y me apasiona la soledad! Creo que no estoy hecha para las obligaciones. En el momento en que me siento atada empiezo a darle vueltas a la libertad.

—Las damas que dicen eso, señorita Middleton...

—¿Qué pasa con ellas?

—Se sienten muy solas.

No podía rebatir la observación. Por confianza en sí misma mantenía el principio de fidelidad y reconocía la verdad de la observación: ¡no hay libertad para los débiles! Vernon lo había dicho una vez. Trató de resistir su peso y su aguda incapacidad la sumió en una sensación de lamentable dependencia.

Media hora antes habría sido peligroso que la acompañara un atento lector de rostros hermosos. Las circunstancias habían cambiado. Estaban a las puertas del parque.

—¿La dejo aquí? —dijo De Craye.

—¿Por qué habría de hacerlo? —respondió Clara.

Él se inclinó con elegancia.

La suave sumisión halagó la languidez de Clara. El coronel no la había obligado a estar en guardia y ella no fue consciente de que la había bajado cuando asintió a su observación:

—Una historia anticipatoria es una trampa para quien la cuenta.

—Lo es —dijo ella. Lo había estado pensando.

De Craye echó atrás su cabeza para consultar cómicamente el cerebro con una docena de pequeños parpadeos.

—No, está usted en lo cierto, señorita Middleton: inventar de antemano no prospera nunca; es una manera de tropezar con nuestra inventiva. La verdad y el ingenio son los mejores consejeros y, como usted es lo primero, trataré de representar el carácter que me asigne.

Alguna maraña. Más prospectiva que presente, parecía esperarla mientras reflexionaba. Pero siendo su intención hablar con Willoughby sin subterfugios, agradecía que su compañía no tratara de desviarla. Nadie podía dudar del talento del coronel para mentir con elegancia y ella estaba de humor para admirar y adoptar ese arte, por lo que le alegraba haber sido rescatada de sí misma. No se preguntó cómo secunda el ingenio la verdad y, como no estaba pensando en Crossjay, no la turbó considerar cómo armonizarían la verdad y el cuento que Crossjay hubiera contado por la mañana.

Al cruzar el parque se preguntó insistentemente si su vuelta complacería a Vernon, que era la causa virtual de ella, aunque hubiera hecho tan poco para promoverla: tan poco que realmente dudaba de su placer al verla volver.

XXIX

En el que se explica la sensibilidad de sir Willoughby y recibe una buena lección

El reloj del establo daba entonces las doce. Era la hora para dar a conocer su huida y Clara se sintió en un torbellino de oscura aprensión que dispuso sus nervios para un doloroso rubor al preguntarle el coronel De Craye si su reloj marchaba bien. Ella comprendió que debía de haberla visto en la mesa del desayuno. ¿No estaba cruelmente en deuda con él por su evasión de Willoughby? Esa visión tan perspicaz la turbó y atemorizo; al mismo tiempo estaba obligada a reconocer que De Craye no había presumido de ello. La dignidad de Clara no era en modo alguno lo peor para él. Pero había estado a merced de un hombre y ahí estaba la aflicción.

Saltó del calesín como si dejara atrás el peligro. Podría haber saludado en ese momento a Willoughby con una sonrisa convencionalmente amistosa. Las puertas estaban abiertas de par en par y el joven Crossjay corrió hacia ella. La cogió de la mano y bailó, se llevó su mano a la boca, apenas convencido de que la estaba viendo y tocando, y en una jerga de guiones y asteriscos contó que sir Willoughby lo había encontrado bajo el alero del embarcadero y tratado de sonsacarle información, y lo había enviado a la granja de Hoppner, donde había un niño enfermo y a una casa de peones en el camino: «Pues le dije que usted es muy amable con la gente pobre, señorita Middleton; es cierto, ahora *es* cierto. Le dije que no me había llevado con usted por temor al contagio». Eso era lo que ella había temido.

—¿Toda clase de chanzas y pullas en el vocabulario del muchacho? —señaló el coronel De Craye después de pagarle a Flitch.

El cochero se llevó la mano al sombrero hasta que logró atraer sobre sí la atención y exclamó con una halagüeña melancolía:

—¡Ah mi señora! ¡Ah coronel! Si vivo para beber el añejo oporto en la vieja casa por Navidad...

La implicación era que su condición sería la de estar borrachos. Flitch levantó los ojos hacia las ventanas, se encogió y se marchó.

—Entonces ¿no ha vuelto el señor Whitford? —le dijo Clara a Crossjay.

—No, señorita Middleton. Sir Willoughby sí, y está arriba en su vestidor.

—¿Has visto a Barclay?

—Acaba de pasar hacia el laboratorio. Le dije que sir Willoughby no estaba allí.

—Dime, Crossjay, ¿llevaba una carta?

—Llevaba algo.

—Corre: dile que estoy aquí. Quiero la carta. Es mía.

Crossjay salió corriendo y cayó en los brazos de sir Willoughby.

—Hay que coger a este muchacho como una pelota de fútbol —exclamó el ofendido caballero, inclinado sobre el muchacho y sujetándolo con fuerza para tener un objeto con el que jugar y no perder la calma: lo necesitaba.

—Clara, ¿no te has expuesto a las inclemencias?

—Cuanto apenas.

—Me alegro. ¿Encontraste cobijo?

—Sí.

—¿En una granja?

—No en una granja, pero estuve completamente cobijada. El coronel De Craye pasó con un calesín antes de encontrarse conmigo...

—¡Flitch de nuevo! —exclamó el coronel.

—Sí, tienes suerte, tienes suerte —le dijo Willoughby, reteniendo aún a Crossjay y tratando sus tirones como una invitación a las caricias. Pero la esgrima no lograba ocultar su lívida perturbación.

—Estate conmigo, señorito —le dijo bruscamente al fin a Crossjay, y Clara le tocó el hombro al muchacho como reprimenda.

Clara se volvió al coronel y pasaron al vestíbulo.

—No le he dado las gracias, coronel De Craye.

Bajó la voz cuanto pudo:

—Una carta de mi puño y letra en el laboratorio.

Crossjay gritó de dolor.

—¡Te tengo! —Willoughby se solidarizó, riéndose de una manera no muy distinta al gemido de su víctima.

—Aprieta demasiado fuerte, señor.

—Vaya, qué blandengue.

—¡Lo soy! Pero quiero coger un libro.

—¿Dónde está el libro?

—En el laboratorio.

El coronel de Craye, de camino hacia el laboratorio, canturreó:

—Yo te traeré tu libro. ¿Cuál es? *¿Los primeros navegantes? ¿Himnos infantiles?* Creo que mi cigarrera está allí.

—Barclay me ha hablado de una carta para mí —le dijo Willoughby a Clara— con la indicación de que me la entregaran a mediodía.

—En caso de que no hubiera vuelto antes: la escribía para evitar la preocupación —contestó ella.

—Eres muy buena.

—¡Oh buena! Llámame cualquier cosa excepto buena. Aquí están las señoras. ¡Queridas señoras!

Clara se adelantó a recibirlas cuando salían de una salita matutina al vestíbulo y las interjecciones reinaron durante un par de minutos.

Willoughby soltó a Crossjay, que salió como una flecha hacia un ángulo del laboratorio, y Willoughby lo siguió y se encontró a De Craye que salía, pero pasó junto a él en silencio.

Crossjay escudriñó toda la estancia. Willoughby fue a su escritorio y a la mesa de trabajo y a la repisa de la chimenea. No encontró ninguna carta. Barclay le había informado, sin duda, de que había dejado una carta para él en el laboratorio por indicación de su ama tras el desayuno. Salió corriendo y subió las escaleras a tiempo de ver a De Craye y a Barclay conversando.

Le hizo señas a la doncella. La muchacha frunció los labios y alisó su vestido: señales de aprensión ante una crisis y de disposición a la acción.

—Acaba de llamar mi ama, sir Willoughby.

—Tenías una carta para mí.

—Le dije...

—Dijiste, cuando te encontré al pie de las escaleras, que habías dejado una carta para mí en el laboratorio.

—Está en el tocador de mi ama.

—Tráela.

Barclay se dio la vuelta con otra mueca de recato. Al parecer era necesario que se dirigiera a sí misma en público de esa manera.

Willoughby la esperó, pero la doncella no reapareció.

Humillado por el ridículo de su postura de expectación y de toda su conducta, se fue a su dormitorio, se encerró y se puso a dar vueltas, sorprendido por la criatura en la que se había convertido. Agitado como el más común de los desgraciados, sin dominio de sí mismo, incapaz de conservar una máscara de decencia, él, acostumbrado a infligir esas emociones y temblores a otros, era la marioneta y la víctima de una muchacha intrigante. Incluso su estatura parecía menoscabada. El espejo no lo decía, pero el corazón encogido en su interior sí y con demasiados gemidos. La compunción de Clara —«Llámame cualquier cosa excepto buena»— tras volver a la casa junto a De Craye, y tras el intercambio visible de un secreto entre ellos en su presencia, era una confesión: le golpeó con la furia de una ráfaga de horno en el rostro. La agonía del Egoísta retorció el lamento de que ser una víctima era una condición más favorable. Deseaba que lo engañaran.

Podía desearlo solo en un transporte temporal, pues, por encima de todo, deseaba que nadie supiera que lo habían engañado y, si fuera una víctima, el engañador lo sabría y su cómplice lo sabría y el mundo pronto lo sabría: ese mundo contra cuya lengua estaba indefenso. Comprimió la opinión a la sombra de su presencia, como una fuerte escarcha traba los retoños de la tierra, pero más allá su temblorosa sensibilidad iba de un lado a otro, temeroso de quedar al desnudo en una atmósfera ventosa. Ese era el motivo de su odio al mundo: era un terror paralizante por el ídolo desnudo, el tierno infante Yo envuelto en su nombre ante el mundo, que le hacía sentirse como el más civilizado de los hombres puede sentirse y ante el cual era imposible protegerse con las manos. La pobre criatura sin amor pasaba de una boca a otra, entumecido por la escarcha y tumefacto, se decía ¡y era inútil! ¿No hemos de detestar un mundo que nos trata de ese modo? Lo aborrecemos más en proporción a nuestro desprecio por los demás al haber esclavizado a todos cuantos quedaban dentro del círculo de sombra de nuestra persona.

Había tenido la popularidad de un joven príncipe: el mundo había sido su posesión. El trato que Clara le daba era un robo de tierra y súbditos. Su gran sueño había sido casarse son una dama de fama tan radiante por su belleza y adhesión a su señor que el mundo se viera obligado a tomarla por testigo de méritos que

silenciarían la detracción y casi (era indeseable) acabarían con la envidia. No podía denunciar a la Fortuna. Le había costado una dolorosa punzada decirle a Horacio De Craye que era afortunado; había sido educado en la creencia de que la fortuna apreciaba especialmente al joven Willoughby y estaba encariñada con él: por eso, sus maldiciones recayeron necesariamente sobre las mujeres o habría tenido que renunciar a la última capa de un sueño cálido como aquel en el que se complacen los poetas.

Pero, si Clara lo engañaba, es que le inspiraba timidez. Había materia ahí para que deseara que lo engañaran. Ella no lo había mirado demasiado a la cara, no había cruzado sus ojos con los suyos; había mirado deliberadamente hacia abajo, con la cabeza alta, para preservar un orgullo exterior. La actitud tenía su embrujo: el orgullo físico de la muchacha por una estatura que desdeñaba inclinarse bajo el peso de una culpa consciente tenía una belleza de ángel caído por la que Willoughby sentía un odio estricto y, de acuerdo con su manera de proceder cuando tenía esos accesos de meditación amorosa, se separaba de su estado de ánimo presente para buscar la concepción más favorable de Clara.

La cualidad del estado de ánimo de odio asfixiante consiste en que no odiamos con más fiereza aunque rechacemos la asfixia.

De otra manera, la prescripción de una distancia decorosa de dos pies y tres pulgadas, que es lo que mide la delimitación exacta de un comportamiento respetuoso, surte un efecto milagroso sobre la gran criatura humana o lo surte a menudo: que su odio peculiar vuelve a la admiración reluctante que lo engendró y su pasión por la asfixia cae postrada como un devoto ante el sepulcro se reduce a la adoración por ayuno.

(Para estos misterios ha de consultarse el sublime capítulo del Gran Libro, el setenta y uno, sobre el Amor, en el que no hay escrito nada, pero el lector recibe una linterna, un barril de pólvora y un pico y con todo ello sigue su polvoriento camino a través de los escombros de los excavadores que lo han precedido en la solitaria cantera; un pasaje, sin embargo, más instructivo que el muy garabateado setenta, o sección francesa, por donde empieza el capítulo, donde hasta ahora se ha detenido el mundo refinado.)

La prisa del héroe es la nuestra; no tenemos tiempo que perder con la minería. Se apresuró a sorprenderla a solas para infligirle torturas amargamente parecidas a la adoración del cuerpo, saciarse y luego desdeñarla cómodamente. La encontró protegida por Barclay en las escaleras.

—¿Esa carta para mí? —dijo.

—Creo haberte dicho, Willoughby, que era una carta que le dejé a Barclay para tranquilizarte en el caso de que no volviera antes —dijo Clara—. No era necesario que te la diera.

—¿De veras? Pero ¡cualquier carta, cualquier escrito tuyo y para mí! ¿Aún la tienes?

—No, la he roto.

—Eso ha estado mal.

—No habría podido darte placer.

—Mi querida Clara, una línea tuya.

—No eran más de tres.

Barclay apretaba los labios. Una doncella al tanto de los secretos de su ama es una doncella a la que se puede comprar, pues si acepta un soborno con la mano derecha lo hará con la izquierda; todo cuanto ha de calcularse es la naturaleza y cantidad del soborno. Esa era la especulación a la que se entregó sir Willoughby y se encogió al pensarlo y rechazó saber más, salvo que se encontraba en una ladera volcánica donde una delgada corteza temblaba sobre la lava. Era una situación nueva para él, que representaba a Clara ganando en el combate. Clara no temía sus preguntas más de lo que temía su propio candor.

Mutuamente tímidos, eran desde luego formalmente educados y no habrían podido hablarse con un lenguaje más llano que fuera más claro que su posición defensiva. Clara seguía firme en su mentira, guardada, sellada y enviada, y él solo tenía que pedirla, suponiendo que la pidiera con una voz que no fuera perentoria.

Ella se dijo: «Es culpa tuya; eres cruel y arruinarías a Crossjay al castigarlo por su devoción, como el pobre muchacho que es. Mi honor me obliga a hacer todo cuanto pueda por él».

La devoción recíproca servía, además, a dos propósitos: la preservaba de darle vueltas a la humillación de su huida truncada y su vuelta y la tranquilizaba a propósito de la precipitada intimidad de sus relaciones con el coronel De Craye. La jactancia de Willoughby sobre su implacable carácter era censurable. Estaba en guerra con él y se veía obligada a plantear el caso a esa luz. Había que proteger a Crossjay de quien no escatimaría esfuerzos en la ofensa, por lo que el coronel De Craye fue llamado naturalmente en su ayuda, y la habilidosa ayuda del coronel le pareció más admirable que alarmante.

Sin embargo, no había respondido falsamente a una pregunta directa. Se mantenía en su mentira piadosa, no en la mentira; con una palabra podía dejar a un lado los subterfugios. Su aspecto lo confirmaba. Willoughby se dio cuenta. Le había escrito una carta de tres líneas. «No eran más de tres» y había roto la carta. ¿Tal vez se arrepentía de algo? Entonces lo había ofendido. Entre su ira por la sospecha de una ofensa y la prudencia que le imponía su abyecta codicia de Clara, consintió en el engaño en aras de la venganza y algo

más.

—¡Bien! Aquí estás, a salvo. ¡Te tengo! —dijo, con una cortés exaltación—. Eso es mejor que tu escritura. He recorrido todo el campo buscándote.

—¿Por qué lo has hecho? No estamos en una tierra de bárbaros —dijo Clara.

—Crossjay dice que has visitado a un niño enfermo, amor mío. ¿Te has cambiado de ropa?

—Ya lo ves.

—El muchacho declaró que habías ido a la granja de Hoppner y a alguna otra casa. Me encontré en mis puertas a un vagabundo que juró haberos visto a ti y al muchacho en una dirección completamente opuesta.

—¿Le diste dinero?

—Imagino que sí.

—Entonces le pagaste por verme.

Willoughby bajó la cabeza. Podía ser como ella sugería. Los mendigos son mentirosos.

—Pero ¿quién te dio cobijo, mi querida Clara? En la granja de Hoppner no sabían nada de ti.

—El dolor deja indemnes a las personas. Pagarles más es echarlas a perder. Has dispersado el dinero con demasiada generosidad. No había fiebre allí. ¿Quién podía anticipar semejante aguacero? Quiero consultar a la señorita Dale una cuestión importante sobre un vestido que pienso ponerme esta noche para la cena de la señora Mountstuart.

—Hazlo. Es infalible.

—Tiene un gusto excelente.

—Se viste de una manera muy sencilla.

—Pero se convierte en ella misma. Es una de las pocas mujeres que creo que no podría mejorar con un toque.

—Tiene juicio.

Willoughby reflexionó y repitió su elogio.

La sombra de un hoyuelo en la mejilla de Clara suscitó en él la idea de que lo había golpeado en alguna parte y desde luego no volvería a ser capaz de suponer la ficción de los celos de Leticia. ¿Cuál podía ser, entonces, el motivo de esta chiquilla para pedir su liberación? La pregunta lo humillaba: esquivaba la respuesta.

Willoughby se fue en busca de De Craye. Ese vivaz intrigante no tenía intención de dejarse coger a solas. No lo descubrió hasta que sonó la campana, cuando Clara dejó caer una o dos palaras en público y él habló en perfecta armonía con ella. Luego acompañó a Willoughby durante una hora al billar y fue derrotado.

El anuncio de la visita de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson llevó a los caballeros a la sala de estar, sospechando que algo se había interpuesto en el camino de su cena. Ocurría que lamentaba solo la pérdida de una de las joyas de la reunión: el gran profesor Crooklyn, invitado a conocer al doctor Middleton en su mesa. La señora Mountstuart contó que había ido a la estación a recogerlo, pues el profesor era un viajero notoriamente distraído, como lo demostró que hubiera perdido el tren en la ciudad, pues no había llegado; ni rastro suyo. Citó a Vernon Whitford como autoridad respecto a que el tren había sido inspeccionado y el andén examinado para encontrar al profesor.

—Y así —dijo— he traído a casa a vuestro hombre verde para secarlo; estaba empapado y tiritando; era como un esqueleto envuelto en una esponja y, si no coge un resfriado, será tan invulnerable como se jacta de ser. Estos atletas son unos jactanciosos.

—Suben hasta la cima de los Alpes —dijo Clara, excitada por la aprensión de que la señora Mountstuart dijera que había visto al coronel cerca de la estación.

Todos rieron y el coronel De Craye se rio estentóreamente como si se le hubiera pasado por la cabeza que una chiquilla tan ingeniosamente impresionable como la señorita Middleton hubiera especulado, antes de su llegada a la casa, con una arcilla tan obstinada como Vernon Whitford, humorísticamente desesperado por su propia inutilidad para Clara. Mirando a su alrededor, vio a Vernon con la mirada fija en la joven.

—¿Ha oído eso, Whitford? —dijo, y, habiendo experimentado el rostro de Clara una contrición más extremada de lo que él pensaba que requería, el coronel se solidarizó con el alpinista por tratar de ser el más alto de los hombres —*Signor Excelsior!* — y describió a esos conquistadores de montañas aplastados en la rocas en abrazos desesperados, blanqueados aquí, quemados allá, desollados por completo, todo para poder decir que han estado «tan alto» y habían conquistado otra montaña. Fue extravagantemente divertido y autocomplaciente: un conquistador del sexo obteniendo recompensas tan distintas.

Vernon se recuperó a tiempo para aceptar los absurdos amontonados sobre él.

—Ascender a una cumbre no se puede comparar con cazar mosquitos —dijo.

Su alusión a la incesante persecución del joven Crossjay para darle las lecciones no pasó inadvertida.

Clara sintió el hilo de la mirada que arrojó al coronel De Craye. Estaba indefensa si él la malinterpretaba. ¡El coronel De Craye no lo hizo!

Crossjay tuvo la mala suerte de entrar en la sala cuando la señora Mountstuart estaba compadeciéndose de Vernon por empaparse en busca del mosquito, lo que De Craye comparó con «ir en busca de su anguila por el río», e inmediatamente se produjo un cruce de preguntas sobre el muchacho entre De Craye y Willoughby a propósito de sus últimos novillos, cada uno de los caballeros tratando de desprestigiarlo por sus palpables mentiras. La sucesión era brillante cuando Vernon le puso fin enviando al muchacho a trabajar. Llevaron a la señora Mountstuart a examinar el hermoso servicio de porcelana, regalo de lady Busshe. «¡Más porcelana!», le dijo a Willoughby, y habría señalado a la «refinada pícara» para que los acompañara si Clara no se hubiera inclinado sobre Leticia para hablar con ella en una actitud demasiado graciosa para turbarla. La señora Mountstuart llamó la atención de Willoughby al respecto, vagamente sorprendida por su impaciencia. Tenía que volver por la tarde a la estación por si llegaba el profesor.

—Pero dígale al doctor Middleton —dijo— que temo no tener a nadie digno de él. Espero —añadió, dirigiéndose a Willoughby, cuando caminaba hacia su carruaje— que lleve usted el grueso de la conversación en la mesa.

—La señorita Dale se lleva mejor con él —dijo Willoughby.

—¡Todo lo hace mejor! Pero mi mesa está en juego y no puedo contar con que una joven la cruce. Alquilaría un león de una casa de fieras, si estuviera disponible, antes que tener a un famoso erudito en mi mesa sin que lo apoye otro famoso erudito. El doctor Middleton se comportará como un duque cuando pruebe el vino. Aterrorizará a mi pobre rebaño. La verdad es que no podemos fermentarlo: preveo grumos indigestos en la conversación salvo que usted lo impida.

—¡Haré todo lo posible! —dijo Willoughby.

—Puedo contar con el coronel De Craye y nuestra belleza de porcelana para algunos destellos, si usted lo promete. Interpretan bien juntos. Usted no será uno de los dioses esta noche, sino una especie de copero de Júpiter; de Juno, si quiere, y lady Busshe y lady Culmer y todos sus admiradores sabrán enseguida lo que ha hecho usted. Ya ve mi alarma. Desde luego no pongo al profesor Crooklyn entre los posibles desleales o no me habría atrevido a invitar al doctor Middleton. Hasta ahora mis cenas han sido un éxito. Naturalmente siento una gran ansiedad por la de esta noche. Un solo fracaso es solo más conspicuo. ¡Siempre se cita la excepción! No es tanto lo que la gente diga cuanto mis propios sentimientos. Odio fracasar. Sin embargo, si usted es fiel podemos lograrlo.

—¡Cuente con mi entusiasmo, madam!

—Algo de eso —dijo la señora Mountstuart sonriendo y dejando que Willoughby reflexionara sobre el egoísmo de las mujeres. Por su cena iba a convertirse en un cero a la izquierda del doctor Middleton ¡y Clara y De Craye serían alentados a brillar juntos! Pero él deseaba ser radiante. La admiración de su condado le había hecho creer que tenía un encanto que su prometida aún no había descubierto ¡e iba a perder su oportunidad para complacer a la señora Mountstuart! Si ella hubiera estado a sueldo de su rival no habría estipulado más condiciones.

Recordó la instantánea quietud del joven Crossjay, tras tratar de zafarse de su abrazo, cuando Clara le dio la mano al muchacho y, de esa circunstancia infinitesimal dedujo que el muchacho había percibido una diferencia entre él y su prometida y que le había transferido su adhesión a ella. Ella resplandecía, tenía el don de la belleza femenina y el muchacho se sentía atraído. Había que hacerle sentir al muchacho su traición. Pero el punto en cuestión era que, igual que Clara vería brillar a su prometido, pues podía brillar cuando lo adulaban sus admiradores, había una probabilidad de que la sensación de la pequeñez de Clara la animara a dirigirse de nuevo a él. Entonces sería el momento de castigarla.

Una visita al doctor Middleton en la biblioteca le confirmó que Clara no había renovado sus esfuerzos para dejar Patterne. No, la miserable coqueta tenía ahora un pasatiempo y prefería quedarse. El engaño flotaba en el aire: Willoughby oía el sonido de la lanzadera del engaño sin verlo, pero, en conjunto, consciente de lo que había temido durante las horas de ausencia de Clara, se sentía más bien adulado, amargamente adulado. ¿Qué era lo que había temido? Nada menos que la noticia de que se había fugado. ¡Una fantasía estúpida, una fantasía de enamorado! Sin embargo lo había llevado a sospechar, tras partir con De Craye en la lluvia, que su amigo y su prometido estaban en colusión y que no volvería a verla. Había gritado en la carretera, bajo la lluvia, la teatral apelación «¡Idiota!», uno de los gritos de la escena que son gritos de la naturaleza. En particular, el grito de la naturaleza de aquellos a quienes otros han empujado a gritar.

Constanza Durham le había enseñado a creer que las mujeres eran capaces de explosiones de traición en medio minuto. Extrañamente, para probar que las mujeres eran todas iguales, Clara lucía la misma placidez en el rostro que antes de escapar, como el día anterior y el de hoy, sin nervios ni rubores, sin arquear las cejas, con suavidad y modales sencillos: casi como si fuera una elegante hermana, podríamos decir; como si la criatura hubiera encontrado un camino intermedio para caminar sorteando la crueldad y la amabilidad, la repulsión y la atracción, de manera que su armadura de fría serenidad atraía hasta el borde mismo de su aliento y repelía a la distancia de un pie. Sin desdén ni pasión: le indicaba a Willoughby que siguiera

en paralelo la línea que ella misma seguía. La pasión en Clara se parecía a un oleaje que se hubiera evaporado, dejando una costra de sal. El parecido de Clara con Constanza en ese ejemplo era ominoso. Para él, cuyo trágico privilegio había sido tenerlas a las dos entre sus brazos, y detenerse sobre sus párpados, y ver cómo se disipaba la niebla en la profundidad de sus ojos, era horrible. Una vez más, la comparación lo abrumó. Podía condenar a Constanza por haber revelado demasiado de su aspecto masculino: ella lo había encontrado casi a mitad de camino; bueno, eso era halagüeño y favorable, pero su franqueza había constituido un desgaste que había vuelto dudoso cuál de los dos, la dama o el caballero, era objeto de la caza: una extrema perplejidad para su alma masculina. Ahora bien, el espíritu interno de Clara era más tímido, tímido como una cierva bajo aquellos abismos teñidos de rosa; atraía tanto al enamorado como al cazador; en sus ojos inquietos había bosques celestiales. La diferencia entre las dos hermosas mujeres hizo que el destino de Willoughby se convirtiera en una angustia intolerable. Si Constanza era como algunas de las damas a las que había hecho infelices, sobre las cuales había triunfado, como extrañamente suele decirse, Clara no lo era. Su individualidad como mujer era algo ante lo que tenía que inclinarse. Era imposible envolverla en su sexo y darle una patada al fardo de viaje. La amaba, por tanto, aunque le doliera. Por eso era desgraciado y, si no fuera por la sinceridad cordial de su fe en el Yo que amaba de la misma manera y más, se habría avergonzado de su abyección.

En cuanto a De Craye, Willoughby recordó sus propias hazañas demasiado orgullosamente como para confiar en un hombre. La conjunción fatal del temperamento y las conveniencias le había hecho bajar la guardia o no habría confiado en Horacio ni siquiera en la primera hora de su amistad con Clara. Pero él quería que se divirtiera mientras trazaba sus planes para retenerla en la casa, imaginando en parte que ella se había cansado de su negligencia: ¡vil engaño! En realidad tendría que haberle ofrecido fiestas, tendría que haber sido el sol de un círculo y revelarse a sí mismo para ella en su forma más cegadora. Casi se consideró a sí mismo idiota una vez que la tremenda reverberación de «¡Idiota!» dejó de sacudirlo.

¿Qué hacer? La pregunta fue una bofetada en la cara del orgulloso caballero. Una conversación privada con ella habría suscitado de nuevo sus súplicas. Las veía parpadear tras la calma transparente de la muchacha. Esa calma extraía su mortal tinte de marfil de la supresión de las súplicas, como él adivinaba, y Willoughby no estaba seguro ni de su propio temperamento ni de sus conveniencias si volvía a oírla repetir su profana petición.

Refrenó el impulso de dirigirse a Vernon y hablar con él jocosamente del capricho infantil de la joven, movido tal vez por un tufillo de celos, de esquivar el yugo. Willoughby siempre había adoptado una pose de superioridad con Vernon que no podía abandonar, ¡menos por ese tema! Además, Vernon era uno de esos hombres que alberga ideas sobre las mujeres sin haber conquistado nunca una: ni una bandera que desplegar. Completamente ignorante del sexo, sus bobas idealizaciones, en cualquier otro momento absurdas, serían ahora enojosas. Probablemente se apoyaría en la inconcebible falta de dignidad de Clara para darle una lección a su maestro: era igual que una filípica sobre los derechos de las mujeres. A ese hombre no le preocupaba decir que hablaba con sentido común a las mujeres. ¡Él era un ejemplo de las consecuencias!

Otro resultado era que Vernon no hablaba con sentido con los hombres. La ira de Willoughby por el hecho de que Clara lo hubiera expuesto a su primo impedía la proposición de un coloquio que pondría a prueba su temperamento y menoscabaría su elevación. Reacio a hablar con nadie, estaba aislado, aunque conscientemente rodeado por la misteriosa acción que estaba en marcha en la casa, desde Clara y De Craye hasta Leticia y el joven Crossjay e incluso Barclay, la doncella. Sentía su ceguera como podemos suponer que una araña se siente cuando es arrancada de su red y se encuentra en el centro de la de otra. Leticia parecía participar del misterio. En sus párpados había una carga. Willoughby era incapaz de imaginar cómo podía haber llegado Leticia a sospechar siquiera las circunstancias. Su intensa simpatía personal, podría ser: Willoughby lo pensó con cierta compasión cortés por ella, de la clase de compasión de palmaditas en la espalda. Ella lo adoraba, por decreto de Venus, y la diosa no había decretado que él hubiera de encontrar consuelo en adorarla a ella. Las tentaciones de un consejo prudente que se le pasaban por la cabeza tampoco podían inducirlo a correr el riesgo de una inversión completa e incurrir en la compasión de Leticia al confiar en ella. Refrenó también ese impulso y de una manera más soberana. Que Leticia lo compadeciera le parecía descomponer el plan de la providencia. La providencia o, dicho de otro modo, la distribución discriminatoria de las cosas buenas de la vida, había hecho de él el faro, de ella el ave: Leticia era realmente la última persona con la que podía franquearse. La idea de encontrarse en una posición que sugiriera que tuviera que hacerlo le hizo sentir punzadas de rabia y lo aterrorizó. Parecía haber otro poder. El mismo que lo había humillado una vez lo amenazaba de nuevo. No podía ser la providencia, cuyo favorito había sido siempre él. Tenía que contar con una pareja de poderes que lo desconsolara cuando el Egoísmo es el núcleo de nuestra religión. La benevolencia lo había señalado beneficios poco corrientes: la malignidad acechaba para despojarlo de ellos. ¡Y aún habrá quien piense bien del mundo!

Por necesidad asoció a Clara con el poder más oscuro que ponía el cuchillo en la carne viva de su orgu-

llo. Sin embargo, él la habría hecho levantarse en caso de llanto, habría curado sus heridas abiertas, sentía un anhelo infinito por su miseria y por descargar su corazón de su caritativo amor. ¡Que ella lo hiciera y fuera rechazada! Solo tenía que hacerlo manifiesto y el mundo también la rechazaría. Al contemplarla como una mala hierba arrancada se quedó sin respiración: Clara era hermosa. ¡Imploró a su poder que Horacio De Craye no fuera el hombre! ¿Por qué un hombre? Una enfermedad, la fiebre, el fuego, caballos desbocados, la desfiguración personal, la cojera eran suficientes. Luego un ofrecimiento formal y noble por su parte para mantener el compromiso con la pobre desgraciada, sí, y llevar a esa cosa renqueante al altar si insistía. Su imaginación lo concebía, con los aplausos del mundo, además.

La náusea, junto con una sensación de deberse a esa línea, apagó esa desagradable perspectiva de una pareja, aunque sin oscurecer su galante devoción a su palabra de honor de caballero, que seguía estando en su cabeza para halagarlo permanentemente.

En conjunto, Willoughby podía esperar razonablemente someter a Clara a la admiración. Se bebió una copa de champán al vestirse; algo insólito, pero, como le hizo ver a su ayuda de cámara, Pollington, a quien dejó el resto de la botella, ese día no se había ejercitado a caballo.

Teniendo que hablar con Vernon de negocios, fue al aula, donde descubrió a Clara, hermosa en su vestido de noche, con su brazo sobre el hombro del joven Crossjay, y oyó que el severo tutor había abjurado de la cena en casa de la señora Mountstuart y se había excusado para mantener a Crossjay sujeto a la piedra del molino. Willoughby se puso de parte del muchacho, como solía, y de una manera más vivaz de lo que solía. Clara lo miró con algo de sorpresa. Le salió al paso a Vernon a su antojo y logró que se callara al decir: «Soy testigo de que el muchacho ha estado aquí sus cuatro horas regulares de lección. ¿Dónde estabas tú?». Puso su mano sobre Crossjay, rozando la mano de Clara.

—Recuerda lo que te he dicho, Crossjay —dijo ella, levantándose con elegancia—. Es una orden.

Crossjay frunció el ceño y suspiró.

—Pero solo si me preguntan —dijo.

—Desde luego —contestó Clara.

—Entonces le preguntaré al granuja —dijo Willoughby, causándole un sobresalto—. ¿Cuál es su opinión, señor, de la señorita Middleton vestida de gala?

—¡La verdad, Crossjay!

Clara levantó el dedo y el muchacho se dio cuenta de su coquetería, pero Willoughby iba en serio.

—La verdad no nos ofenderá ni a ti ni a mí —le murmuró Willoughby a Clara.

—No querría que Crossjay dijera nada falso nunca, nunca, con ninguna excusa.

—Siempre he pensado en ella como una belleza —balbuceó Crossjay. Odiaba tener que decirlo.

—¡Eso es! —exclamó sir Willoughby y extendió su brazo hacia ella—. ¡La verdad no te ha hecho sufrir, Clara mía!

Su respuesta fue:

—Estaba pensando lo que podría sufrir él si le enseñaran a decir lo contrario.

—¡Oh! De una hermosa dama.

—Es la peor de las enseñanzas, Willoughby.

—Lo dejaremos al instinto del muchacho. Tiene nuestra sangre. Podría convencerte, sin embargo, aduciendo algunas circunstancias. Sí. ¡Sí! ¡Otra vez sí! Toda la verdad no puede decirse invariablemente. Me atrevo a decir que no debería.

—¿Se lo perdonarías a la *hermosa dama?*

—Lo aplaudiría, amor mío.

Se apretó la mano con su brazo al contemplarla.

Clara se había puesto un voluminoso vestido de seda azul pálido con adornos de gasa del mismo tono, *gaze de Chambéry,* que rivalizaba con su hermoso cabello y piel blanca al abrumar a hombres menos inflamables que Willoughby.

—¡Clara! —suspiró.

—Si es así, sería verdaderamente generoso —dijo—, aunque la enseñanza fuera mala.

—Imagino que puedo ser generoso.

—¿Lo sabremos alguna vez?

Willoughby se volvió hacia Vernon para darle algunas instrucciones sucintas de unas cartas que habían de enviarse y condujo a Clara al vestíbulo, diciendo:

—¿Saber? Hay gente que *no* se conoce a sí misma y, como esa gente es la mayoría que fabrica los axiomas, se supone que hemos de tragárnoslos. Observo que creo saber. Declino ser absorbido por esas mayorías. *Entre ellos, pero no con ellos.* Sé que mi propósito en la vida es ser generoso.

—¿No es un impulso o disposición más que un propósito? Lo sé bien —prosiguió Willoughby, que no quería tropezar. Pero ella sonaba de una manera discordante en su oído. Su «Imagino que puedo ser genero-

so» y su «propósito de ser generoso» no habían suscitado respuesta en ella.

—Te daré pruebas —dijo brevemente Willoughby para dejar caer un asunto en el que no podía permitirse demorarse y murmuró—: «La gente que me conoce...

Le preguntaba a Clara si ella esperaba que él se jactara de hechos generosos. «Desde la infancia», lo oyó murmurar, y se dijo a sí misma: «¡Libérame y lo tendrás todo!»

El infeliz caballero sentía dolor al hablar, pues ni con los hombres ni con legiones de mujeres que le eran indiferentes hablaba de esa manera desordenada, de tercera categoría, vergonzosa, desprovista de toda elevación en el tono y la precisión debida a una autoridad. Era incapaz de sondear su causa, pero Clara se la había impuesto y solo airado podría desembarazarse de ella. Tuvo que resistir la tentación de un estallido que lo adulara con el sonido de su propia voz autoritaria en una noche en la que debía componerse si quería brillar, de modo que se limitó a mencionar el regalo de lady Busshe, atenuando el rencor y preparando el terreno a la disensión, y consintió prudentemente la situación resbaladiza que Clara había anticipado. Ella no lo veía ahora, dijo.

—Ahora no, muy bien —dijo él.

Su inmediata deferencia la obligó a lamentarse.

—Apenas hay tiempo, Willoughby.

—Querida mía, tendremos que darle las gracias.

—No puedo.

Willoughby contrajo su brazo con fuerza. Estaba obligado a callar.

Al unírseles en el vestíbulo, el doctor Middleton, Leticia y las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel encontraron dos figuras juntas en una sombría indicación de dos mitades que se hubieran separado y mantuvieran una última hebra en común. Willoughby tenía la mano de Clara en su brazo; la conservaba como el símbolo de su alianza y oprimía los nervios de la muchacha en contacto con un cuerpo al que le costaba respirar. De Craye los miraba desde lo alto. Los carruajes esperaban en la puerta y Willoughby dijo:

—¿Dónde está Horacio? Supongo que estará echando un último vistazo a su libro de anécdotas y a su colección de irlandesismos.

—No —respondió el coronel, bajando por las escaleras—. Se impulsa a sí mismo y ha descubierto el secreto del movimiento perpetuo, ¡lástima! Salvo que prefieras entregárselo a la ciencia.

Se rio de buen humor.

—Tu risa, Horacio, es un comentario perfecto a tu ingenio.

Willoughby lo dijo con el aire de quien hubiera manejado un látigo.

—Es una afable advertencia de una plaza libre —dijo De Craye.

—Precisamente: tres para los subastadores y una para la propiedad.

—¡Oh! Si tienes un curandero musical, anota un punto a su favor, Willoughby, aunque no te tragues el medicamento.

—Si se propone ser musical, démosle tiempo.

—¿Llego tarde? —dijo De Craye a las damas, demostrando ser un experto en el arte de ser vencido con elegancia y ganarse con ello a los corazones tiernos.

Willoughby se había recobrado. En el trasfondo se agazapaba la sospecha de que su adversario no se hubiera rendido de una manera tan llana sin asegurarse en la práctica el triunfo, sacando en secreto lo mejor de sí mismo, y eso lo llenó de veneno para un próximo ataque a la menor oportunidad; pero, como había sido sarcástico y mordaz, le había mostrado a Clara lo que podía hacer con una manera de hablar distinta al lamentable arrullo, carraspeo y débiles protestas a las que, no sabía cómo, lo había reducido. Compartiendo la opinión de su raza de que las personalidades francas, o pugilísticas, administradas directamente en los rasgos sobresalientes, son exhibiciones de dominio en esos encuentros, se sintió fuerte y sólido, dispuesto al éxito esa noche. De Craye iba en el primer carruaje como escolta de las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. Willoughby, con Clara, Leticia y el doctor Middleton iban en el siguiente, en silencio, pues el reverendo doctor Middleton estaba ostensiblemente pensativo, y Willoughby fue decepcionante cuando abrió su boca para decir:

—Sin embargo, no he observado que el coronel De Craye sea un Ignacio celtíbero que merezca ser fustigado por mostrar sus blanqueados dientes de una manera impertinente, señor: *quicquid est, unicunque est, quoqunque agit, renidet* . ¡Ja! *Morbus* sin encanto ni urbanidad para el ojo general, aunque sea un consuelo para el actor. Pero este caballero no ofende de ese modo o mi prejuicio a su favor es demasiado extraño y me convierte en un testigo incompetente [45] .

Los persistentes «Eh» del doctor Middleton, en un honesto ceño fruncido de interrogación, desbarataron lo que pretendía ser desdeñosamente humorístico en Willoughby y pronto se convirtió en una disculpa bajo la mirada interrogativa del doctor.

—Esos irlandeses —dijo Willoughby— interpretan al humorista profesional como si fuera un oficio para el que han nacido. Nos toca ser críticos o nos inundarán con sus imitaciones de Joe Miller [46] .

—¿Sus imitaciones de Joe O'Miller, querrá decir?

Willoughby aceptó la chanza, pero el reverendo doctor, aunque sonreía del modo paternal propio de quien ha engendrado la hilaridad, no fue del todo propicio y añadió:

—Hasta donde sé, *la risa del hombre es el comentario a su ingenio* no es indisputablemente nuevo: podemos recurrir a ejemplos de frases afines. Pero ha de advertirse que era una frase de asalto, una batería ostentosa, y me atrevo a recordarle, amigo mío, que, entre los elegidos, considerando que es tan fatídicamente fácil suscitar la risa de un hombre como privarlo de su vida; considerando que solo tenemos que ser condescendientes con el arma y que, cuanto más popular sea el arma, más mortífera resulta; entre los elegidos, a cuyo número aspira por distinción a pertenecer, la regla consiste en abstenerse de todo uso de lo obvio, lo manido y, del mismo modo, por usted mismo, de lo trillado, lo excesivo, pues si lo primero, que el entendimiento de su auditorio asimilará rápidamente, puede asesinar a su víctima, lo último recibirá la acusación de indecoroso, en la medida en que es una descripción del suicidio público. Asumiendo que matar hombres sea su pasatiempo y propenda al harakiri, la frase, para evitar la criminalidad, debe salir de usted como querría que cayera sobre él, *ex improviso* . ¿Estoy en lo cierto?

—Tengo el hábito de pensar que es imposible, señor, que usted se equivoque —dijo Willoughby.

El doctor Middleton fue más enfático al no decir nada más.

Tanto su hija como la señorita Dale, que no habían aprobado la pulla sobre el coronel De Craye, estaban asombradas con el arte de hablar que, de una manera tan mansa, podía informar a un caballero de que su conducta no había sido caballerosa.

A Willoughby lo decepcionó lo que comprendió de todo ello durante unos minutos. En la medida en que recordaba una velada con sus antiguos admiradores se restableció y empezó a maravillarse por su estupidez al no dar banquetes ni bailes en lugar de la soledad que había forjado para él y su prometida. La soledad, pensó, es buena para el hombre, pues el hombre es una criatura consumida por la pasión; el amor de la mujer, por el contrario, se alimenta de las luces reflejadas que capta de nosotros en los ojos de los demás, desprovista de pasión, teniendo simplemente un instinto que la lleva a adherirse a lo que resulta más admirado, más brillante. Con ese pensamiento, decidió cambiar su conducta y fue más feliz. En la primera efusión de nuestra sabiduría extraída directamente de la experiencia hay una intoxicación mental que cancela el viejo mundo y establece otro nuevo, que no nos permite preguntarnos si es demasiado tarde.

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45 El doctor Middleton parodia a Catulo. «Sea lo que sea, esté donde esté, haga lo que haga, sonríe».

46 Joe Miller (1684-1738) fue un actor inglés. A su muerte se publicó un libro, *Joe Miller's Jests, or the Wit's Vade-Mecum* (1739), que recogía una serie de frases apócrifas y que dieron pie a lo que Meredith llama *Joe Millerism* .

XXX

Que trata de la cena en casa de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson

VERNON y el joven Crossjay trabajaron de firme durante dos horas, interrumpidas por la llegada de un plato de comida en una bandeja para el maestro y algunas preguntas que, de vez en cuando, le hizo el muchacho en referencia a la señorita Middleton. Crossjay había descubierto que, si se abstenía de aludir a la belleza de la señorita Middleton, podía regar su polvoriento camino con su nombre casi a su gusto. La mención de su belleza incurría en reprimenda. En la primera ocasión su maestro se mostró nostálgico. «¿No es gloriosa?» Crossjay se imaginó que acusaba recibo de las benditas distracciones. Volvió a intentarlo, pero el trueno del pedagogo estalló sobre su cabeza.

—Sí, aunque no entiendo lo que ella quiere decir, señor Whitford —se excusó—. Primero, yo no iba a hablar; sé que no lo habría hecho, porque ella lo había dicho; lo dijo. Cuando le pegué a aquel animal de vagabundo, que es una *moraleja andante* y le saca el dinero a la gente sorbiéndose los mocos, sus últimas palabras fueron: Recuerda, Crossjay, que no sabes nada de mí.

—Atiende a tu lección o recibirás una —dijo Vernon.

—Sí, pero, señor Whitford, ahora *voy* a hablar. Voy a contestar sinceramente a cualquier pregunta.

—La señorita Middleton quiere que seas sincero.

—Sí, pero por la mañana me dijo que *no* hablara.

—Tenía prisa. Le pesaba que no la hubieras entendido y quería que no fueras culpable de insinceridad, menos a cuenta suya.

Crossjay suspiró violentamente:

—¡Ah! —y advirtió—: Si yo estuviera seguro.

—Haz lo que pide, muchacho.

—Pero no sé qué es lo que quiere.

—Atiende sus últimas palabras.

—Eso hago. Si me hubiera dicho que corriera hasta desfallecer, lo haría.

—Te dijo que estudiaras tus lecciones: hazlo.

Crossjay se inclinó sobre su libro, revitalizado por la imaginación de su soberana en la página.

Tras un calculado intervalo, mientras había durado la impresión de su dama, retomó la conversación:

—¡Es tan divertida! Es como una chica y también es una dama. Es la idea que yo tengo de una princesa. ¡Y el coronel De Craye! ¿No le han enseñado a bailar? No es divertido y parece discutir con su rival. Me gustaría ser tan inteligente como el padre de la señorita Middleton. ¡Eso sí que es un hombre inteligente! Me atrevería a decir que el coronel De Craye bailará con ella esta noche. Me gustaría estar allí.

—Es una cena, no un baile —se vio obligado a decir Vernon para disipar esa fea visión.

—¿No lo es, señor? Pensaba que bailaban después de cenar. Señor Whitford, ¿la ha visto correr alguna vez?

Vernon le señaló su tarea.

Estuvieron callados durante un buen rato.

—Pero ¿quiere la señorita Middleton que hable si sir Willoughby me pregunta? —dijo Crossjay.

—Desde luego. No debes preocuparte por eso. Todo es llano y sencillo.

—Pero estoy convencido, señor Whitford, de que no va a oír que la señorita Middleton fue conmigo a la estafeta después del desayuno. ¿Cómo la encontró el coronel De Craye y la trajo de vuelta con el viejo Flitch? Él es un hombre y puede ir donde quiera, y yo también la habría encontrado si hubiera tenido la oportunidad. Ya sabe que le tengo cariño a la señorita Dale, pero ella (le tengo mucho cariño), pero no se puede pensar que ella sea una chica también. Cuando la señorita Dale dice algo, bueno, es claro. Pero la señorita Middleton puede darle muchos sentidos. No importa. Seré franco y estoy seguro de que la complaceré.

—Quita la mejilla de la mano y el codo del libro y aplícate —dijo Vernon, luchando contra la seducción de la idolatría de Crossjay, pues la aparición de la señorita Middleton había sido sobrenaturalmente dulce al marcharse y el placer siguiente había sido oír hablar de ella en labios de ese apasionado y joven poeta.

—Recuerda que la complacerás diciendo la verdad —añadió Vernon y se dispuso a responder preguntas sobre la verdad, con las que se dio cuenta, con una perpleja sensación de envidia y simpatía, de que la idea que tenía el muchacho de la verdad se aproximaba mucho a su concepción de lo que resultaba agradable a la señorita Middleton.

Estaba solo, carente del bardo, cuando metió a Crossjay en la cama y lo dejó. No podía leer sus libros; los pensamientos lo turbaban. Un sillón en la biblioteca y la mirada perdida le ayudaron a pasar las horas y, salvo por la mancha de tristeza que movía a la meditación a pesar de su esfuerzo por embotarse, habría tenido un feliz parecido con un idiota al sol. No dominaba su razón. ¡Era tan hermosa! Cualquier cosa que hiciera era lo mejor. Ese era el estribillo del sonsonete de la fuente en sus oídos; la carga era sus caprichos, veleidades, incoherencias, tretas; su temblor entre el bien y la travesura, que podía considerarse noble o terrible; su sinceridad, su duplicidad, su valor, cobardía, las posibilidades de heroísmo o traición. A fuerza de demorarse en el tema, magnificó a la joven a una estatura extraordinaria. Tenía suficiente sentido común para confesar que el carácter de Clara aún no había cuajado en el molde y que era una criatura dotada de una cualidad salvaje naturalmente juvenil, empujada a la rareza por el desafío de una situación tan aguda como cualquiera que pudiera sucederle a su sexo en la vida civilizada. Pero se veía obligado a pensar en ella de una manera disparatada y se inclinó ligeramente a desacreditarla porque su imagen lo desconcertaba y era insoportable. Decir al final «¡Es demasiado hermosa! Cualquier cosa que haga es lo mejor» mitigaba el daño que hiciera. Si hubiera estado en su poder habría pensado en ella en abstracto, el estadio siguiente al que había adoptado, pero el intento fue en vano. El Estagirita habría fracasado también. ¿Qué filósofo habría relegado a la sombra ese rostro de sol y de brisa y de ninfa como un aspecto del problema?

La señorita Dale abrió la puerta de la biblioteca a media noche. La cerró tranquilamente.

—¿Está usted trabajando, señor Whitford? Imaginaba que querría oír cómo ha ido la noche. ¡El profesor Crooklyn vino al final! La señora Mountstuart se sorprendió: dijo que lo esperaba a usted y que usted no se había excusado con ella y que no podía comprenderlo etc. Es decir, escogió la sorpresa para consentirse las exclamaciones. Debía de estar enojada. El profesor vino en el tren y ella fue a recogerlo.

—Era probable —dijo Vernon.

—Tuvo que quedarse dos horas en la posada de la estación: no había transporte. Cree que se ha resfriado y no podía reprimir su inquietud al respecto. Tal vez sea tan culto como el señor Middleton, pero no tiene la misma constitución feliz. No podía haber ocurrido nada más desafortunado. Estropeó la reunión. La señora Mountstuart trató de mimarlo, lo cual atrajo la atención sobre él y nos puso a todos en su clave durante algunos minutos desconcertantes, más de una vez. La señora Mountstuart perdió la cabeza, no era ella. Puedo ser presuntuosa al criticarla, pero ¿no debería, quien preside la mesa, tratarla como un campo de batalla y dejar que el invitado que se hunde descienda, sin permitir que la voz discordante de otro, por ilustre que sea, la gobierne? Por supuesto, es al ver los fallos cuando me imagino que yo podría manejarlo mejor; es más prudente reservar la comparación en otros casos. Soy una crítica osada, sin duda porque el experimento no me pondrá a prueba nunca. No tengo ambiciones de ponerme a prueba.

Sin advertir la sonrisa de Vernon, continuó:

—La señora Mountstuart le dio la voz cantante en cualquier tema que escogiera. ¡Creo que el profesor no habría dejado nunca de hablar de una joven que había estado en la posada antes que él bebiendo brandy caliente y agua con un caballero!

—¿Cómo oyó hablar de eso? —exclamó Vernon, irguiéndose por la malignidad de los hados.

—Por la posadera, que trataba de consolarlo. Y la historia de haberle prestado zapatos y medias mientras se secaban los de la joven dama. Tiene el terrible y susceptible modo humorístico de contar algo que impresiona; la mesa recogió el tema de esa admirable joven y si era una dama de la vecindad y quién pudo ser para aventurarse a pie con la fuerte lluvia. Fue doloroso para mí. Sabía lo suficiente para estar segura de quién era.

—¿Se delató ella?

—No.

—¿La miró Willoughby?

—Sin sospecharlo entonces.

—¿Entonces?

—El coronel De Craye nos divertía y es muy entretenido. La señora Mountstuart le dijo luego que debía cobrar el rescate por salvar el naufragio de la fiesta. Sir Willoughby fue un poco cínico; habló bien; lo que dijo fue acertado, pero carente de humor; no tiene la temeraria indiferencia del coronel De Craye para decir absurdos y resultar divertido. En la sala perdió la alegría que tenía. Yo estaba cerca de la señora Mountstuart cuando el profesor Crooklyn se acercó a ella y habló de manera que yo lo oyera de *aquel* caballero y *aquella* joven. Podía verse por sus cabeceos que eran el coronel De Craye y la señorita Middleton.

—¡Y ella enseguida se lo mencionó a Willoughby!

—El coronel De Craye no le dio ocasión, si ella la buscaba. La cortejó profusamente. Detrás del sonajero ha de tener sesos. Corría en todas las direcciones para entretenerla a ella y a su círculo.

—¿Willoughby no sabe nada?

—No puedo juzgar. Estuvo con la señora Mountstuart un minuto mientras nos íbamos. Ella tenía un as-

pecto extraño. Le oí decir *la pícara* . Él se rio. Ella se encogió de hombros. Willoughby apenas abrió la boca de vuelta a casa.

—Las cosas han de seguir su curso —dijo Vernon, con el aire filosófico que es desesperación decorosa —. Willoughby se lo merece. Un hombre plenamente adulto ha de saber que nada en la tierra es tan tentador para la providencia como tratar de retener a una joven contra su voluntad. Esos dos se atraen mutuamente: los dos son... Se juntan y está hecho el daño; los dos son brillantes. Él puede persuadir con una palabra. Otro podría hablar como un ángel y sería inútil. He dicho todo cuanto pensaba, en vano. Así es: ¡existen esas atracciones! Igual que, con ella, Willoughby es lo contrario, repele. A mí me ocurre lo mismo o me ocurriría si ella estuviera comprometida conmigo. Esto es, durante cinco minutos, el espacio de tiempo que requeriría la formalidad de devolverle su libertad. ¿Cómo puede un hombre sensato imaginar que una chiquilla como esa...? Pero ¡si ella cambiara, si ella cambiara! No puedes conciliar un afecto marchito. Retenerla, engatusarla, no prestarle atención solo hace que aumentar su aversión; aprende el arte a su vez. Aquí está, retenida por nuevas tramas para mantener al doctor Middleton en casa. Es cierto, ¿no es así?

Vernon veía que era así.

—¡No, no es culpa de ella! Ella se lo dijo; él no quiso escucharla. La cuestión, entonces, es si ella mantendrá su palabra o la romperá. Es una disputa entre una idea convencional de la obligación y una ofensa a su naturaleza. ¿Qué es lo menos deshonroso? Usted y yo vimos enseguida que sus sentimientos la guían mejor. Es uno de los pocos casos en los que hay que consultar la naturaleza como a un oráculo.

—¿Está ella tan segura de su naturaleza? —dijo la señorita Dale.

—Usted lo duda; yo no. Me ha sorprendido que volviera. De Craye es un hombre de mundo y supongo que la aconsejó. Él... bueno, yo no tengo una lengua persuasiva y mi defecto no cuenta demasiado.

—Pero ¡una intimidad tan repentina!

—El desastre es más bien famoso *a primera vista* . Ha llegado en una hora afortunada... para él. Un pigmeo es un gigante si se las arregla para llegar a tiempo. ¿Se dio usted cuenta del peligro cuando se miraron por segunda o tercera vez? Usted me aconsejó que me quedara, aunque la cantidad de bien que hago en comparación con lo que tengo que soportar es microscópica.

—Sé que iba en contra de sus deseos —dijo Leticia y, cuando las palabras hubieron salido, temió que fueran tentadoras. Su delicadeza retrocedía incluso ante la idea de que él la relacionase con una situación tan delicada como la de la señorita Middleton.

El mismo sentimiento lo preservó de traicionarse y dijo:

—Parcialmente. Ambos preveíamos lo posible, porque, como la mayoría de los profetas, conocíamos un poco más las circunstancias que nos permitían ver lo fatal. Un pigmeo habría servido, pero De Craye es encantador, inteligente, agradable.

—¡El amigo de sir Willoughby!

—Bueno, ¡en estos asuntos! Una gran parte ha de atribuirse a la diosa.

—¡Eso es fatalismo pagano!

—Nuestra palabra moderna para eso es naturaleza. La ciencia condesciende a hablar de selección natural. ¡Fíjese en ellos! Los dos tienen gracia y estrella e ingenio; son brillantes a la vista y a la mente, están hechos el uno para el otro, como dice la gente del campo. No puedo culparlo. Además no sabemos si es culpable. Estamos en la oscuridad, salvo que sabemos cómo acabará. Si tiene usted la oportunidad de darle a Willoughby una palabra de consejo —podría ser—, tal vez, sin irritarlo como mi conocimiento de su empeño lo irrita, podría insinuar sus propios ojos abiertos. Su insano temor a un mundo que lo espíe lo hace artificialmente ciego. Tan pronto como se imagina que lo ven se pone a tejer una red y no discierne nada más. Por lo general es una red inteligente, pero le da igual que sea una maraña para los demás o un velo. Está preparando la catástrofe, forzando el resultado. Háblele del extremado deseo de irse de la señorita Middleton. Trátela de loca para suavizarlo. De otra manera, una mañana se levantará por segunda vez... Es completamente seguro. Y la segunda vez será solo culpa suya. Inspírele algo de filosofía.

—No tengo ninguna.

—Si yo pensara así, le diría que la suya es mejor. Hay dos clases de filosofía, la mía y la suya. La mía proviene de la frialdad, la suya de la devoción.

—Es improbable que me escoja como confidente.

Vernon meditó.

—No podemos adivinar lo que hará porque no conocemos el calor central que precipita sus acciones; domina el arte de la ocultación. En cuanto a mí, como habrá advertido, mis opiniones son demasiado filosóficas para poder usarlas. Solo culpo a aquel que mantiene el vínculo. ¡Cuánto antes me vaya...! De hecho, no puedo quedarme. ¿Así que el doctor Middleton y el profesor no encendieron juntos el fuego?

—El doctor Middleton estaba preparado y lo persiguió, pero el profesor Crooklyn insistió en tiritar. Su línea en verso blanco (¡Un andén y una posada de estación!) se volvió patética al repetirla. Debió de sufrir.

—¡Alguien tiene que hacerlo!

—¿Por qué el inocente?

—Llega a propósito. Pero recuerde que a veces Fridolin se las arregla para escapar y el culpable arde [47] . El profesor no habría sufrido si hubiera perdido el tren, como parece que acostumbra. Así, su insólita buena fortuna fue la causa de su mala suerte.

—¿Lo vio usted en el andén?

—No conozco al profesor. Tuve que sacar a la señora Mountstuart del camino.

—Ella dice que se lo describió a usted. Rostro mofletudo, consistencia de *quenelle,* gris y como un santo sin aureola detrás de la cabeza.

—Sus descripciones son muy precisas, pero olvida esbozar su espalda y todo lo que vi fue una estrecha espalda y un ancho sombrero de alas. El informe que le di hablaba de un anciano caballero de tez oscura como único viajero en el andén. La señora Mountstuart tiene fe en sus poderes descriptivos y estaba deseosa de marcharse enseguida. La intención era irse a Londres. El coronel De Craye llegó y en cinco minutos logró lo que yo no pude conseguir en treinta.

—Pero ¿vio usted pasar al coronel De Craye?

—Había hecho mi trabajo; tuve que ser un intruso. Además estaba fingiendo que mi chaqueta estaba empapada para que la señora Mountstuart condujera rápido o habría podido saltar para buscar ella misma al profesor.

—Dice que usted estaba tan flaco como un tenedor, con el viento soplando entre los dientes.

—Ya ve lo fácil que resulta engañar a alguien que es una artista con las frases. Evite a esas personas, señorita Dale. Enturbian la penetración del compositor. Esa es la razón de que gente capaz como la señora Mountstuart vea tan poco: prefieren describir brillantemente las cosas. Sin embargo, es de corazón amable y caritativo. He estado pensando esta noche que, para cortar este nudo como es debido, la señorita Middleton no podría hacer nada mejor que hablar directamente con la señora Mountstuart. Nadie más tiene influencia sobre Willoughby. El simple hecho de que la señora Mountstuart lo sepa es casi suficiente. Pero hace falta valor para eso. Buenas noches, señorita Dale.

—Buenas noches, señor Whitford. ¿Me perdonará por haberlo molestado?

Vernon le apretó la mano para asegurárselo. Solo tenía que verla y repasar su historia para pensar que su primo Willoughby sería justamente castigado. De hecho, si llegamos a conocer que un hombre o una mujer han maltratado al querido muchacho Amor y somos normalmente sensatos, contemplaremos el golpe retributivo a su debido tiempo [48] .

La señorita Dale se retiró pensando que Vernon y ella compartían la misma condición inexpresiva que habían logrado mediante la pena. Él había tenido éxito al enmascararse ante ella gracias al temor de Leticia a las circunstancias. Ella se reprochó no tener la misma devoción a la fría idea del deber que tenía él y, aunque necesitara una investigación, no dejaría de preguntarse por qué Vernon había dejado a la señorita Middleton presa del brillante coronel. Parecía una prueba de la filosofía que predicaba.

Al pasar por el dormitorio del joven Crossjay se asomó un rostro. Sir Willoughby salió lentamente y se presentó de lleno, rogándole que no se alarmara.

Lo dijo en voz baja, con un rostro cualificado para suscitar el sentimiento.

—¿Está usted cansada? ¿Tiene sueño? —dijo él.

Leticia respondió que no; se proponía leer durante una hora.

Willoughby le pidió que le dedicara esa hora.

—Me aliviará conversar con una amiga.

No se le pasó por la cabeza ningún subterfugio. Pensó que haber visitado al muchacho en la cama era un hermoso gesto; estaba llena de compasión; cedió a la extraña petición, sintiendo que ni siquiera correspondía a una *vieja mujer* darle importancia al descubrimiento público de entrevistas a media noche en las que ella era uno de los participantes y sintiendo también que la estaba tratando como a una vieja amiga en forma de una mujer muy vieja. Se inclinaba a frenar toda recurrencia de un proyecto que había esbozado con frecuencia en *innuendo* y del que, a causa de sus repetidos temblores al respecto, pensó que era un maestro.

La llevó a través del pasillo a la salita privada de las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel.

—¡Engaño! —dijo, mientras encendía las velas de la repisa de la chimenea.

Ella estaba verdaderamente compadecida y una palabra que pudiera no relacionarse con su destino personal la alivió al desplazar su aprensivo antagonismo y darle vía libre a la piedad.

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47 Alusión a la balada de Schiller *Der Gang nach dem Eisenhammer* .

48 En la edición de 1897, Meredith borró lo siguiente: «Esto, que no sucede en casos de hurtos pequeños, traición ni asesinato

es tan claro que no hace falta dudar al decir que equivale a una ofensa a nuestra salud animal en la infalibilidad y rapidez del castigo. No hay una prueba más poderosa de la divinidad de esa brillante y oscura joven que su propensión a golpear y contra-atacar».

XXXI

Sir Willoughby se propone ser patético y lo consigue

Se habían sentado ambos. En apariencia Willoughby habría preferido ver las oscuras pestañas alicaídas en silencio bajo la sanción de su aire de abstracta meditación y la melancolía a la que inducía. En las mejillas de Leticia había rubor; la reunión había inspirado sus rasgos. ¿Podía ser que la vivaz compañía, la ausencia de preocupaciones económicas y un hogar floreciente fuera todo lo que requería para volver a florecer? La suposición no era aventurada en presencia de su rostro agudizado.

Leticia levantó los ojos. Willoughby no pudo encontrarse con su mirada sin hablar.

—¿Podría *usted* perdonar el engaño?

—Sería jactarme de tener más caridad de la que sé que tengo si dijera que puedo, sir Willoughby. Espero ser capaz de perdonar. No puedo decirlo. Me gustaría decir que sí.

—¿Podría vivir con quien la engañara?

—No.

—No. Podría haber dado esa respuesta por usted. ¡No debería mantenerse la menor semejanza de unión entre quien nos engaña y nosotros, Leticia!

—¿Sir Willoughby?

—¿No tengo derecho a llamarla por su nombre?

—Si eso le complace...

—Hablo como me vienen los pensamientos y no conocen a la señorita Dale tan bien como a la querida Leticia: ¡mi más sincera amiga! ¿Ha hablado usted con Clara Middleton?

—Hemos tenido una conversación.

Su brevedad lo asustó. Estaba como en una nube.

—Volviendo a la pregunta por quien nos engaña: ¿no es de la opinión de que perdonar, condonar, es corromper la sociedad haciendo pasar por puro lo que es falso? ¿No habremos falsificado moneda, Leticia?»

Willoughby sonreía con la macilenta jovialidad de un chiquillo convaleciente el primer día que vuelve con sus juguetes.

—Suponiendo que sea una decepción real.

—Aparte mi aversión al engaño, a cualquier forma de falsedad, con cualquier motivo, considero un deber imperioso darlo a conocer, castigarlo. Creo que es uno de los perjuicios que un buen ciudadano está obligado a extirpar. No soy suficientemente buen ciudadano, lo confieso, para algo más que mostrar un aborrecimiento pasivo. No perdono: soy serio hasta la medula y no puedo perdonar; no hay reconciliación posible; solo puede declararse una tregua entre los dos poderes hostiles que se dividen este mundo.

Ella lo miró rápidamente.

—¡El bien y el mal! —dijo Willoughby.

El rostro de Leticia expresó una sorpresa que afectó a su corazón.

Willoughby interpretó que las arrugas de su frente significaban que ella temía que él hablara de una manera poco cristiana.

—Lo encontrará en todas las religiones, mi querida Leticia: la hindú, la persa, la nuestra. Es universal; una experiencia de nuestra humanidad. El engaño y la sinceridad no pueden convivir. La verdad debe matar la mentira o la mentira matará la verdad. No perdono. Todo cuanto le digo a la persona es que se vaya.

—Pero ¡eso está bien! ¡Es generoso! —exclamó Leticia, alegre de aprobar lo que Willoughby decía para cegar su alma crítica y aliviada por la idea de que la dificultad de Clara se había resuelto.

—*Capaz* de generosidad, tal vez —murmuró él.

Ella lo hirió al no confirmar con entusiasmo, como él esperaba, que creyera en su tendencia general a la magnanimidad.

Tras una pausa, Willoughby dijo:

—Pero no es probable que al mundo le impresione nada que no lo gratifique inmediatamente. La gente cambia, me doy cuenta: ¡conforme aumentamos en años dejamos de ser los héroes que éramos! Yo soy insensible al cambio: no admito esa acusación. Salvo en esto, diríamos que se trata de ambición personal. No me queda. ¿Qué es cuando la tenemos? Decididamente, ¡una confesión de inferioridad! Es decir, el deseo de distinción es un reconocimiento de insuficiencia. Pero aún tengo el anhelo de que mis amigos más queridos piensen bien de mí. ¿Debilidad? Llámelo así. ¡No es una debilidad deshonrosa!

Leticia no paraba de darle vueltas a la relación de lo que Willoughby estaba diciendo con el diálogo que lo había precedido. Estaba perpleja porque no conocía «el calor central en él», como Vernon lo había llamado de una manera opaca y caritativa con el objeto de la adoración de Leticia.

—Bueno —dijo Willoughby, intranquilo—, además de la pasión por sobresalir, he cambiado algo en el entusiasmo de mi sed por las diversiones propias de mi situación. No me preocupa mantener un semental; una vez estuve tentado. Ni perros. Recuerdo el día en el que decidí tener las mejores perreras y la mejor crianza de caballos del reino. ¡Pueril! ¿Qué es esa distinción o cualquier adquisición o logro? ¡Lo preguntamos! Nuestra *identidad* no es mayor. Buscarla, debido a nuestra pequeñez, en el hecho real y, cuando se consiga, entonces ¿qué? Mis caballos son buenos, admirados; desafío al condado a superarlos. ¿Y? No son más que mis caballos; la alabanza es para los animales, no para mí. Rechazo compartirla. Sin embargo, conozco a algunos que se contentan con la alabanza de sus bestias y son medio equinos. ¡La pequeñez de nuestros compañeros en la multitud de la vida es una experiencia muy extraña! Podemos lamentar haber perdido la sencillez de nuestros antepasados, que aceptaban esas y otras distinciones con un placer cordial, por no decir orgullo. Por ejemplo, yo soy, como suele decirse, un intento fallido. ¡Aclamad, caballeros, a mis ancestros, de los que he heredado una mano firme y una vista sagaz! No *me* afecta. Donde no me encuentro —que *yo* sea *esencialmente* yo—, el aplauso no me conmueve. Para hablar con usted como no hablaría con nadie, la admiración —ya sabe que en mi primera juventud nadaba en halagos, ¡tenía que nadar para no ahogarme!—, la admiración de mis dones personales se ha vuelto insípida. He cambiado, por tanto, en la medida en que ha habido un desarrollo de la espiritualidad. Estamos sometidos a leyes mortales y hasta ese punto he cambiado. Podría añadir que es insólito que un caballero rural se aplique a investigaciones científicas. Sin embargo, se corresponden con el espíritu del tiempo. Lo aprendí instintivamente en la universidad. Renuncié a los clásicos por la ciencia y con ello escapé al vicio de la autosuficiencia dominante peculiar en los clasicistas, de lo que ha tenido un divertido ejemplo en el carruaje, de camino a casa de la señora Mountstuart. La ciencia es modesta; lenta, si lo prefiere: trata con hechos y, tras dominarlos, domina a los hombres; por necesidad, no con una arrogancia estúpida: ¡palabras gruesas y extrañamente vestidas como la guardia papal! Por supuesto, nos inclinamos ante el Infalible. ¡Hemos de hacerlo cuando sus gigantescos mercenarios levantan las bayonetas!

Sir Willoughby le ofreció a la señorita Dale medio minuto para que pudiera, a la suave manera femenina, asentir al reproche implícito de la conducta del doctor Middleton con él durante el trayecto a casa de la señora Mountstuart. Leticia no asintió.

Su corazón acusaba a Clara por haber hecho mal y haber hecho daño. Mientras sir Willoughby hablaba, le pareció que justificaba los sentimientos de Clara y su conducta, y las sensaciones de perjuicio reavivadas de Leticia volvieron a la superficie un momento para contemplarlo, afirmando que lo perdonaban y compadecían, pero apenas se sorprendían.

El calor central en él había administrado el consuelo que necesitaba, aunque las notas concordantes de la conclusión que Willoughby amaba en los labios de la mujer, esa obsequiosa armonía de otro instrumento que los músicos desean cuando han ejecutado su solo, no acudieron a dar por terminada la ejecución: ni un compás. Leticia no habló. Probablemente su Leticia estaba vencida, como él sabía que lo estaba siempre que conversaban; con los nervios sometidos, incapaz de emplear sus recursos mentales o musicales. Sin embargo, solía tener a su disposición los últimos. ¿Se condolía demasiado? ¿Había una razón para ello? ¿Había hablado la impulsiva y desesperada muchacha con Leticia a fondo? ¡Hija desvergonzada de un señor dominante como era! Una interrogación más espectral (lo golpeó en el centro con un sonido circular): ¿lo compadecía Leticia por algo peor que la pena de una diferencia entre enamorados, por traición por parte de su prometida? ¿Conocía ella un rival? ¿Sabía más que él?

Cuando su centro era golpeado violentamente se volvía un genio en la penetración. Adivinó que ella sabía y con ello recibió ayuda para lograr el patetismo.

—Así que elegí la ciencia —prosiguió— y, aunque me haya convertido, como temo, en una *rara avis* entre los caballeros rurales, me ha unido, me ha puesto en lo esencial, podría decir, en la única corriente del progreso, una palabra bastante despreciable en su jerga política. ¿Ha disfrutado de la velada en casa de la señora Mountstuart?

—Mucho.

—Traerá a cenar aquí a su profesor pasado mañana. ¿La sorprende? ¿Se ha sobresaltado?

—No oí su invitación.

—Lo arreglé en la mesa. Usted y yo estábamos cruelmente separados, le dije a la señora Mountstuart. Ella dijo que nos veíamos bastante y que era bueno para mí que estuviéramos separados; nada de lo cual es cierto. Puedo no saber lo que es mejor para mí, pero sé lo que es bueno. Si en mis días más jóvenes me equivoqué notoriamente, eso, tomado por sí mismo, es, suponiendo que yo tengo sentido y sentimientos, la prueba más segura de la sabiduría presente. Puedo testificar en persona que la sabiduría es dolor. Si el dolor se

añade a la sabiduría, ¡sufriré! ¿Lo aprueba usted, Leticia?

—Está bien dicho.

—Es lo que siento. Quienes hayan sufrido conocerán el beneficio de la decisión.

—Podemos sufrir tanto que solo deseemos paz.

—Cierto, pero ¿usted? ¿Ha sufrido usted?

—Sería para lograr paz si yo rezara por un don terrenal.

Sir Willoughby dejó caer una sonrisa para ella.

—He mencionado la guardia abigarrada del Papa. En mi juventud su singular atuendo me impresionó. Me han dicho que han cambiado de uniforme. Lo siento. Sigue siendo uno de mis recuerdos más vivaces de la Ciudad Eterna. Afectaron mi sentido del humor, siempre alerta en mí, como usted sabe. Nosotros, los ingleses, tenemos humor. Es lo primero que se advierte en nosotros cuando llegamos al continente: nuestras facultades risibles están generalmente activas durante todo el viaje. El humor, o el choque del sentido con nuevos ejemplos de lo absurdo, es nuestra característica. No condesciendo a muestras bulliciosas. Observo y anoto lo cómico de la gente para mi correspondencia. Usted ha leído mis cartas, la mayoría de ellas, si no todas.

—Muchas.

—¡Yo estaba con usted entonces! Iba a decir (la guardia suiza me lo ha recordado) que usted no ha estado en Italia. Lo he lamentado constantemente. Usted es la mujer apropiada, tiene alma para Italia. No conozco a nadie más de quien pueda decirlo, con quien no sintiera que está fuera de lugar, discordante conmigo. ¡Italia y Leticia! A menudo las he unido. Veremos. Empiezo a tener esperanzas. Aquí está usted literalmente estancada. ¡Vaya, una cena la renueva! ¡Lo que lograría un viaje y aquel clima celestial! Usted ha leído historia y poesía. ¡Bien, poesía! No he visto, sin embargo, la poesía que exprese la décima parte de lo que siento en presencia de la belleza y magnificencia cuando realmente medito, profundamente... Considere que mi mente es positiva. Siento: es solo que siento intensamente para la poesía. Por su naturaleza, la poesía no puede ser sincera. Obtendré sinceridad. Lo que afecte nuestras emociones ha de ser espontáneo, no un artificio. Sé que usted está a favor de la poesía. Usted me ganará, si alguien puede hacerlo. Pero ¡la historia! Ahí estoy con usted. Caminar sobre ruinas, de noche, los arcos del solemne anfiteatro negro a la luz de la luna sobre nosotros, ¡a la luz de la luna en Italia!

—¿No se reiría, sir Willoughby? —dijo Leticia, levantándose presa de un estupor de asombro aprensivo para darse cuenta de las circunstancias.

—Además, usted, creo, o me equivoco con usted...

Sir Willoughby se desvió de su proyectado discurso.

—Usted no es víctima de la sensación de asociación ni de lo ridículo.

—Puedo entender su influencia: al menos tengo una concepción de lo humorístico; pero no haré el ridículo en el Coliseo de Roma. ¡No podría soportarlo, no, sir Willoughby!

Parecía que lo estaba tomando completamente en serio, pidiéndole que no se riera en el Coliseo. Sir Willoughby dijo entonces:

—Además, usted se acomoda a la compañía de las señoras, mis tías. ¡Buenas mujeres, Leticia! No puedo imaginarlas *de trop* en Italia o en una casa. Desde luego tengo razón para ser parcial en mi juicio.

—Son señoras excelentes y extremadamente amables. Las amo —dijo Leticia fervientemente, tan excitada en su fervor por su propia iluminación como por la deriva de sir Willoughby.

Interpretó que se proponía llevarla a Italia con las señoras, después de haberle dado a la señorita Middleton su libertad; necesariamente eso estaba implícito. Era muy generoso. En su juventud había sido famoso por su liberalidad al repartir plata y oro. ¿No se le habría interpretado mal en su vida posterior?

Clara le había hablado de la visita y la misión de las señoras en la biblioteca y Leticia se atrevió a concebir que seguía el rastro de lo que sir Willoughby se proponía, siendo capaz de disfrutar de la compañía de las señoras y suponiendo que él no consideraba que la señorita Middleton lo fuera, ni en el extranjero ni en casa.

Sir Willoughby le preguntó:

—¿Podría viajar con ellas?

—¡Claro que podría!

—¿Sinceramente?

—Se lo aseguro. Sería un placer.

—De acuerdo. Es una promesa.

Extendió su mano.

—¡Sea o no yo del grupo! ¡A Italia, Leticia! ¡Me complacería estar con usted y, si he de ser excluido, me complacerá pensar en usted en Italia!

Su mano estaba extendida. Leticia tenía que fingir que no se había dado cuenta o darle la suya. No tuvo

el descaro de fingir que no la había visto y se la dio. Él la estrechó y, aunque la retiro enseguida, la movió arriba y abajo, como un instrumento que le hubieran prestado para poner énfasis en sus observaciones. Un orador amoroso puede ser muy enfático con una dama cautiva.

—No soy capaz de decir nada sobre ese ni sobre ningún otro asunto. Soy, creo que usted lo dijo una vez, como un alga que el océano empuja. Puedo hablar de mí mismo; no puedo hablar de otra persona. Me encuentro infinitamente aturdido. Si pudiera gritar ¡A Italia mañana! ¡Ah...! No permita que me queje. Conozco mucho al hombre. Pero, Leticia, ¡engaño! ¡Engaño! Es un mal sabor en la boca. Nos hace enfermar de humanidad. Lo comparo a un terremoto: perdemos toda nuestra confianza en la solidez del mundo. No es solo una traición a la persona; es una traición al género humano. ¡Amiga mía! ¡Amiga constante! No, no desesperaré. Sí, tengo defectos; los recordaré. Pero perdonar es otra cuestión. Sí, *puedo* perdonar la ofensa; no la falsedad. En interés de la humanidad, ¡no! ¡Tan joven y ese engaño!

Leticia se sobresaltó. Su mano estaba retenida: una dama que la ha dado no puede luchar para soltarla; las barbacanas que la protegen abrigan traicioneramente al enemigo que asedia la ciudadela cuando entra. A cambio de la armadura de seda que nuestra civilización le presta, se exige que sea suave y cortés casi hasta el punto de perecer. Respiró hondo, diciendo al aspirar: «Si... no fuera así, apenas...». Suspiró largamente. La entristeció saber tanto.

—Pues cuando amo, amo —dijo sir Willoughby—. Mis amigos y sirvientes lo saben. No hay término medio: no conmigo. Lo doy todo, lo exijo todo. Absorbo en la medida en que me absorben. Cancelamos y creamos, nos extinguimos e iluminamos recíprocamente. El error puede estar en elegir el objeto: no en la pasión. Confianza perfecta, abandono perfecto. Repito: exijo porque doy. ¡Puede denunciarse el egoísmo del amor: es una parte de nosotros! Mi respuesta sería que es un elemento solo de los más nobles de nosotros. ¡Amor, Leticia! Hablo de amor. Pero a quien traiciona la confianza para arrastrarnos al barro; a quien traiciona, traiciona y nos entrega al mundo, en cuya presa nos convertimos a causa de las virtudes que fuimos educados para pensar que era una bendición poseer: ¡dígame qué nombre darle! De nuevo: siempre ha sido uno de mis principios respecto al sexo. Pero si vemos a las mujeres falsas, traidoras... Se preguntará por qué consentirnos esas opiniones abstractas. El mundo nos presiona con ellas, lleno como está de los especímenes más viles. Tratan de arrancar cualquier principio arraigado: se burlan de nuestra adoración; nos quitan nuestra religión. Esa experiencia amarga del mundo nos devuelve al antídoto que conocíamos antes de hundirnos: alguien... algo que estimábamos y seguimos estimando. ¿Es ese antídoto lo suficientemente fuerte para repeler el veneno? ¡Así lo espero! ¡Así lo creo! Perder la fe en las mujeres es terrible.

Willoughby la miró con atención. Leticia parecía distraída: no se había conmovido.

Leticia estaba pensando que, con la excepción de una muestra de arrogancia, sir Willoughby hablaba de una manera excelente con los hombres, al menos a tono con las cosas que quería decir, pero que su manera de hablar con las mujeres era excesivamente artificial: la lengua tutorial de la deferencia sentimental del macho encumbrado, demasiado aflautada, y se preguntaba si era eso lo que lo había llevado a naufragar con la señorita Middleton.

La sagacidad intuitiva de sir Willoughby le aconsejó insistir en el patetismo para conmoverla. Era una tarea, pues, aunque percibía que ella no ignoraba su empeño, dudaba de que conociera su extensión y, como su deseo era únicamente conmoverla sin exponerse, tenía que resultar patético, como si estuviera impedido por la armadura de un caballero, que no puede levantar fácilmente el pecho ni mostrarlo.

Además, el patetismo es una marea: a menudo arrastra a quien lo despierta y lo hace girar, con armadura y todo, en ignominiosas actitudes de postración inútil de las que se avergüenza retrospectivamente. No podemos preservar nuestra dignidad cuando nos dedicamos al trabajo de provocar las lágrimas. Probablemente Moisés tuvo que dar un salto desde la roca una vez que aquel venerable legislador hizo que brotara el agua de ella.

Sin embargo, era imperativo para sir Willoughby que ella estuviera segura de que él tenía el poder de conmoverla.

Empezó, oscuramente al principio, como el caballero armado tratando de sacar un pañuelo.

—¿Qué somos? Duramos poco tiempo. ¿Por qué no vivir para gratificar nuestros apetitos? Podría realmente preguntarme por qué. Todos los medios para saciarlos están a mi disposición. Pero no: debo aspirar a lo más elevado, a aquello que en mi ceguera consideraba lo más elevado. Usted conoce el instinto del deportista, Leticia: no lo tienta el objeto detenido. Así somos en nuestra juventud, jugando con la felicidad, dejándola, proponiéndonos lo desconcertante y atractivo.

—Ganamos conocimiento.

—¡A qué precio!

La exclamación iba acompañada de autoconmiseración y el patetismo estaba a la mano.

—Pagando la mitad de nuestras vidas por ello y todas nuestras esperanzas! Sí, ganamos conocimiento, somos más sabios; con toda probabilidad mi valor sobrepasa ahora el que tenía cuando era más joven. Pero

¡lo perdido! La floración de la juventud del alma es como la salud al cuerpo; una vez se marcha nos deja mutilados. Mi querida y preciosa amiga, debo retener estos cuatro dedos. Me parecen el resto de un naufragio; pronto quedará libre, absolutamente, Leticia, no me queda nada más. Hemos hablado de engaño. ¿No ser engañados? Cuando la persona a la que adoramos queda expuesta y se nos niega el estéril consuelo de un objeto digno... No hay desgracia como esa. Si fuera la muerte aún podríamos adorarla. La muerte sería preferible. Pero ojalá no conozca usted una situación en la que se fuerza la comparación con alguien inferior para nuestra desventaja y nuestra pérdida a causa de nuestra generosidad en dar todo el corazón en custodia a alguien superficial, casquivano... No nos detendremos en los epítetos. Si tuviera que encontrar tantos malos nombres para la serpiente como lunares hay en su cuerpo seguiría siendo serpiente, ni mejor ni peor... ¡La soledad! ¡La oscuridad! Nuestra luminaria apagada. El respeto que nos debemos impide que sigamos adorando, pero la afección no queda al margen. Nos encontramos literalmente en el polvo, arrastrados; nos arrancaríamos ese respeto si pudiéramos, adoptaríamos como modelo la criatura preferida, nos humillaríamos y degradaríamos, clamaríamos justicia como si hubiera perdón...

—¡Perdón! Cuando estamos rehusando concederlo... —murmuró Leticia, y eso fue cuanto pudo hacer. Recordaba que, en su antigua miseria, sus esfuerzos por ser caritativa habían hecho que se sintiera ella misma pecadora y pidiera perdón en sus plegarias: un noble sentimiento que llenaba de piedad el pecho del que brotaba. No había parecido entre las ideas de sir Willoughby y las suyas, pero su idea había brotado de su palabra «perdón» y sus ojos húmedos le concedían el beneficio. Los labios de Leticia temblaban y rodaron las lágrimas.

Willoughby había oído algo, sin captar las palabras, que eran manifiestamente favorables; la emoción de Leticia se lo confirmaba, así como el resultado que había estado buscando. ¡Había una mujer que se inclinaba ante él para toda la eternidad! ¡Había inspirado a una mujer la misteriosa pasión que el hombre deseaba del abandono de sí mismo, de la autoinmolación! Tenía delante la evidencia. En cualquier momento, si quería, podía volar hasta ella y pedirle su entusiasmo.

De hecho, en virtud de la simpatía, había tenido éxito en suscitar los mismos impulsos de patetismo en ella que animaban su empeño de suscitarlos en sí mismo.

Willoughby besó la mano de Leticia; luego la soltó, levantándose para inclinarse sobre ella.

—No llore, Leticia; ya ve que yo no lo hago: puedo sonreír. Ayúdeme a soportarlo, no me desanime.

Leticia trató de contener su llanto, pero la autoconmiseración amenazaba con verter todos sus años de pesar sobre su cabeza. Le dijo:

—Debo irme... No me encuentro bien. Buenas noches, sir Willoughby.

Temiendo seriamente que hubiera sepultado demasiado su orgullo en la consideración de ella y hubiera ido más lejos de lo que se proponía en el camino del patetismo, Willoughby observó:

—Hablaremos mañana de Crossjay. Su mendacidad ha sido grande. Como he dicho, me ha ofendido mucho el engaño. Pero está usted cansada. Buenas noches, mi querida amiga.

—Buenas noches, sir Willoughby.

Le dio permiso para salir.

El coronel De Craye, que venía de la sala de fumar, se la encontró y advirtió el estado de sus párpados cuando le deseó buenas noches. Vio a Willoughby en la habitación de la que ella había salido, pero pasó sin decir nada ni reflexionar por qué tenía tanta consideración.

La revisión que nuestro héroe hizo de la escena lo dejó en conjunto satisfecho de la parte que había desempeñado. Estaba seguro ahora de su poder sobre una mujer. Clara lo había hecho agonizar con la duda de su dominio personal sobre cualquiera. Era un pobre festín, pero las punzadas de su carne durante los últimos días y las últimas horas lo llevaron a quitársela de encima, furiosa y despreciativamente. Un pobre festín; sin embargo, ella era una fortaleza, un punto de apoyo, escudo y lanza, refugio e ímpetu. Ahora podía enfrentarse con osadía a Clara. Si ella se resistía y lo desafiaba, no estaría desnudo y solo; preveía que podía ganar honor a los ojos del mundo desde su posición: algo en lo que pensar solo en la más extrema necesidad. El efecto que surtió sobre él su reciente ejercicio de patetismo fue el de serenarlo para dormir. Por el momento estaba satisfecho.

Los duendes que lo vigilaban también estaban satisfechos y bailaron alrededor de su cama una vez que el celoso caballero dejó de debatir la cuestión de haberse revelado más allá del perdón a Leticia y entregó a un sueño benigno la dirección de sus asuntos.

XXXII

Leticia Dale descubre un cambio espiritual y el doctor Middleton otro físico

CLARA cruzó el césped por la mañana temprano para saludar a Leticia. Se apartó de un coloquio con el coronel De Craye bajo las ventanas de sir Willoughby. El coronel había sido uno de los bañistas y parecía un domador de circo, agitando una toalla húmeda mientras Crossjay hacía piruetas.

—Querida, ¡soy muy desgraciada! —dijo Clara.

—Querida, le traigo noticias —respondió Leticia.

—Cuénteme. Pero el pobre muchacho ha sido despedido. Sir Willoughby corrió al dormitorio de Crossjay anoche y sacó al muchacho dormido de la cama para interrogarlo y obtuvo la verdad. Es un consuelo, pero Crossjay tendrá que irse de la casa porque no había sido sincero antes: por mí, para servirme; realmente siento que estaba a mi cargo. Crossjay estará fuera todo el día y ha prometido volver por la noche para tratar de ser perdonado. Debe ayudarme, Leticia.

—¡Es usted libre, Clara! Si lo desea, solo tiene que pedir su libertad.

—¿Quiere decir...?

—La liberará.

—¿Está usted segura?

—Tuvimos una larga conversación anoche.

—¿Se lo debo a usted?

—Nada se debe a mí. Lo hizo voluntariamente.

Clara hizo como si levantara sus ojos en señal de apóstrofe.

—¡El profesor Crooklyn! ¡El profesor Crooklyn! Ya veo. ¡No lo había captado!

—Dé crédito a algo de generosidad, Clara. Es usted injusta.

—A la larga: seré más que justa a la larga. Practicaré con la trompeta: impartiré lecciones sobre la grandeza de las almas de los hombres cuando los conozcamos de verdad. Ahora solo los conocemos a medias y somos injustas. ¿No se engaña usted, Leticia? ¿No hará falta que hable con papá? ¿Nada de engaños? Me ha turbado usted. Me siento una persona muy pequeña. Creo que entiendo a quienes lo admiran. ¿Me devuelve mi palabra sin más? ¿Con claridad? Sin... ¡Oh! Esa larga disputa en escenas y cartas... ¿Podrá arreglarse que papá y yo nos vayamos no más tarde de mañana? ¡No seré capaz de explicarle a nadie cómo caí en esto! Me estremece pensarlo. Toda la culpa es mía: he sido escandalosa. ¡Ah querida Leticia! ¿Ha salido usted tan pronto para decírmelo?

—Quería que lo oyera.

—Le doy mi corazón.

—Una parte, pero ¡para bien!

—¡Qué vergüenza! Pero usted tiene derecho a decirlo.

—No querría ser grosera, pero ¿no es el corazón al que usted alude alarmantemente inquisitivo?

—Es egoísta, pues me olvido de Crossjay. Si vamos a ser generosas, ¿no habrá que perdonar a Crossjay? Aunque solo fuera por que el padre del muchacho está luchando por su país, poniendo en peligro su vida día y noche, por un sueldo que no es suficiente para sostener a su familia, estaríamos obligados a pensar en el muchacho. ¡Pobre y querido muchacho! Cuando dijo: ¿Por qué no quiere (nadie) ver a mi padre y mi padre tuvo que caminar diez millas bajo la lluvia?, no podía imaginar cuánto me dolería... Pero tenemos una mañana espléndida tras la lluvia de ayer. Seremos generosas. Confieso, Leticia, que es posible dorar la mañana más gloriosa de la creación.

—Sin duda el espíritu puede hacerlo y que sus colores sean permanentes —dijo Leticia.

—Usted conmigo, yo con usted, él con nosotras. Bien, entonces, si lo hace, será uno de mis días del cielo. Una prueba para la experiencia. Aún no ha amanecido.

—¿Ha visto al señor Whitford esta mañana?

—Pasó junto a mí.

—¡No lo crea de mal humor!

—Tuve una institutriz, una mujer instruida, que me enseñó en persona lo pintoresco de la irritabilidad. Su temperamento era siempre perfecto porque no se equivocaba nunca, pero, al equivocarme yo, ella se irritaba. Llevaba mi maldad bajo sus cejas y me miraba a través de ella. Era una niña díscola.

Leticia dijo riéndose:

—¡Lo creo!

—Sin embargo, me gustaba y yo le gustaba a ella. Éramos una especie de primer plano y de trasfondo: ella me aliviaba y yo justificaba su existencia.

—Me hago una idea.

—Ahora dice de mí que soy la única criatura a la que ha amado. ¿Quién sabe si no acabaré diciendo lo mismo de ella?

—Usted seguiría siendo una molestia y un enigma.

—¿He sido una molestia y un enigma para el señor Whitford?

—¿Le recuerda a ella?

—Ha dicho que se hacía una idea.

—Ah no se ría de él. Es un amigo sincero.

—El hombre que puede ser un amigo es el hombre que presumirá de ser un censor.

—Un censor dulce.

—No puedo decir nada de la sentencia que pronuncie, pero su frente es una condena radamántica.

—¡El doctor Middleton!

Clara miró alrededor.

—¿Quién? ¿Yo? ¿Ha oído usted un eco de papá? Él no le habría dado a Radamanto un alma europea, porque parece que Radamanto solo juzgaba a los asiáticos, así que se equivoca, señorita Dale. Mi padre está obsesionado con el señor Whitford. ¿Por qué será? Nosotras, las mujeres, no podemos sondear las profundidades de los eruditos, probablemente porque sus perlas carecen de valor en nuestro mercado, salvo cuando se dignan a castigar a un impertinente, y el señor Whitford está demasiado alto para advertir la existencia de los pececillos. Es profundo, estudioso, excelente. No me sorprendería que, si descendiera entre nosotros, lo hiciera como un Tritón que se acercara a la orilla.

El hábito de Leticia de mostrarse obsequiosamente dulce, que era su ideal de feminidad, aunque no casara con su agudo carácter debido a la ausencia de un placer pleno en su vida —la herida abierta que tenía y el calambre de una servidumbre tan antigua que parecía de hierro—, la indujo a decir, como si asintiera: «¿No cree usted que se encuentre a gusto en sociedad?». Pero deseaba defenderlo firmemente y, por tanto, tenía que despojarse del ideal que se había impuesto en su actuación cotidiana, por lo que —siendo un caso imprevisto, completamente nuevo para ella— el proceso que avivaba la inteligencia de la dama la confundió. Obrar parcialmente es un método soberano de engatusar nuestras brillantes mitades. Cualquier miembro autobiográfico honesto del mundo animado es testigo de ello.

Añadió:

—¿No lo ha encontrado simpático? Lo es. ¿Lo considera meditabundo, sombrío? Es lo contrario; jovial, indiferente a la desgracia personal. El doctor Corney dice que no hay risa como la de Vernon Whitford ni humor como el suyo. Últimamente... Pero no se trata de su cruel palabra, irritación. La verdad es que le preocupa mucho Crossjay, por encima de otras cosas, y que quiere irse. Además, se encuentra en desventaja como caballero, pero su Tritón en la orilla es injusto, feo. Puedo decir que es el hombre más sincero que conozco.

—No cuestiono su bondad, Leticia.

—Ha puesto el acento sobre ella.

—¿Lo he hecho? Debo de ser como Crossjay cuando dice que lo que más le gusta es divertirse.

—Crossjay debe conocerlo, si alguien lo conoce. El doctor Whitford la ha defendido contra mí, Clara, puesto que puedo llamarla así. Tal vez cuando usted suponía que era como su antigua institutriz estuviera él meditando cómo ayudarla. Anoche me dio razones para pensar que usted haría bien en confiar en la señora Mountstuart. Ya no es necesario. Solo lo menciono. ¡Es un amigo devoto!

—Es un caminante incansable.

—¡Oh!

El coronel De Craye, que merodeaba cerca de las damas con la esperanza de verlas despedirse, siguió entonces el método de hacer tres de dos.

Cuando se les unió con su resplandeciente conversación, Leticia miró a Clara para consultarla y vio que su rostro se ruborizaba como el de una novia.

La sospecha que había alimentado imprimió en sus brazos una reacción muscular.

—¿Dónde está mi querido muchacho? —dijo Clara.

—De vacaciones —respondió el coronel con el mismo tono.

—Aconseje al señor Whitford que no pierda el tiempo buscando a Crossjay, Leticia. Es mejor que Crossjay pase el día fuera. Al menos así lo pienso. ¿Lleva Crossjay dinero, coronel De Craye?

—Mi señor tendrá posada.

—¡Qué previsor es usted!

El seno de Leticia albergó una exclamación muda, equivalente a «¡Mujeres, cautivas siempre de la brillantez y la frivolidad, desatentas a la fidelidad, la modestia, la beneficencia!»

Esa retórica dramática sobrevive en las secretas cavilaciones de los moralistas.

La comparación era toda suya y estaba indignada por el contraste, aunque no habría podido decir con qué fin estaba indignada, pues no tenía idea de Vernon como rival de De Craye en el favor de una dama comprometida. Pero estaba celosa a causa de su sexo: la reputación de su sexo parecía estar en juego y su pureza amenazada por la ociosa preferencia de Clara por el hombre más superficial. Cuando la joven había hablado tan descuidadamente de ser como Crossjay, tal vez no supiera que había establecido un parecido, basado en la similitud de sus entusiasmos, amores y apetitos, entre las mujeres y los muchachos. Leticia lo aborrecía, lo rechazaba por completo, salvo cuando, en momentos de amargura, se las arreglaba para que una joven veleidosa (siempre joven) recibiera esa denominación. Vernon podía ser todo lo filosófico que quisiera. Para Leticia, la alegría de esos dos, el coronel De Craye y Clara Middleton, era una música desafinada: armonizaban dolorosamente. La representante de su sexo salía perjudicada con ello.

Tenía que quedarse con ellos: Clara la cogía del brazo. La voz del coronel bajaba a veces hasta convertirse en un susurro. Las respuestas eran audibles y fluidas. El ingenioso caballero aceptaba la corrección, pero, al prestarle una atención asidua a la señorita Dale, a la manera del intrigante, se mostraba necesitado de otra cantidad de reproches. Clara dijo. «Hemos estado consultando, Leticia, qué hacer para curar al profesor Crooklyn de su resfriado». De Craye advirtió que habían dado un mal paso y le sorprendió poderosamente que, entre todos los hombres, pudiera descubrirse en él una lección de intriga. La audacia de la señorita Middleton no era tan sorprendente: reconocía grandes capacidades en la joven. Temiendo que fuera más lejos y redujera la ventaja del secreto con ella, cambio de tema y se sometió.

El modo que tuvo Clara de saludar a sir Willoughby expresó una tímida disposición a la amistad con una pregunta velada, que nadie entendió salvo Leticia, cuyo cerebro trataba de darse garantías a sí misma de no haberlo malinterpretado. ¿Podía haber alguna duda? Decidió que no podía haber ninguna y, apoyándose en esa base de razón, se imaginó que lo había conducido hasta allí. Legítima o no, la imaginación brotaba de una sólida fundación. Un día antes no habría podido concebirlo. Ahora estaba autorizada a sentir que tenía el poder de influir en él, porque ahora, desde la medianoche, se sentía emancipada del hechizo de su dominio físico. No le parecía un hombre distinto, pero ella era más consciente de ser una mujer más fuerte. Él ya no era la nube sobre ella ni el imán; la nube había cubierto el cielo una vez, el imán la había obligado fatalmente a acercarse a él. Aún lo admiraba: su aire encantador, sus hermosas proporciones, la cortesía de inclinarse hacia Clara y rozarle la mano excusaban un exceso fanático de admiración por parte de una mujer en su juventud que no es la anatomista de las gracias señoriales de su héroe. Pero ahora lo admiraba fragmentariamente. Cuando tuvo que recomponerlo, lo hizo fríamente. Compadecerse de él era toda su calidez. Sin concebir en él nada del antiguo y extraño monstruo de la tierra que había impresionado la despierta mente juvenil de la señorita Middleton, Leticia lo clasificó con otros hombres: era «uno de ellos». No adujo su desencanto como una acusación contra él. Se acusó a sí misma, reconociendo que el secreto del cambio era que su propia juventud había muerto; de otra manera, ¿lo habría podido compadecer sin ser ella misma arrastrada por la inundación? La compasión era ferviente y también pura. Suponía que él suplicaría; vio que Clara Middleton se mostraba agradable con él solo por lo que esperaba de su generosidad. Leticia se apenó. La mirada pesarosa de ella fortificaba a sir Willoughby mientras él y Clara entraron en el laboratorio cogidos del brazo.

Leticia tenía que decirle a Vernon que era inútil batir la casa y el terreno en busca de Crossjay. El doctor Middleton lo retuvo en una discusión sobre una disputa clásica que había mantenido la noche anterior con el profesor Crooklyn, que iba a retomarse durante el día. El profesor haría una visita expresamente para retomarla. «Un buen erudito», dijo el reverendo doctor, «pero malhumorado, como todos los hombres que no pueden saborear su oporto».

—He oído que estaba resfriado —señaló Vernon—. Espero que el vino fuera bueno, señor.

Como cuando el presidente de un jurado sentimental tiene que informar a un tribunal temible, exigente en la precisión, de un veredicto que, por necesidad, ha de resolverse en la horca para el acusado y, sin embargo, atenúa el crimen de un villano palpable mediante la recomendación de misericordia, ese presidente, ante la mirada atenta del maestro en la construcción gramatical y sintiendo el peso de, al menos, tres sentencias en su cabeza, junto con una perspectiva de un interrogatorio judicial para descubrir lo que quiere decir con precisión, se ve oprimido, él mismo en un juicio, y duda, recapitula, y el temor de la involución lo lleva a involucrarse; hasta donde un hombre en esa situación puede apelar a la misericordia, suplica que su exposición poco clara de razones absurdas sea entendida y se alegraría, si fuera verosímil que tuviera permiso para ello, de arrojar una palabra implorante para volver a sentarse entre la multitud sin perder ni siquiera un momento la estimación de su señoría... Así, movido por la caballerosidad hacia una dama, por la cortesía al recuerdo de una anfitriona y particularmente por el conocimiento de que su oyente podría esperar cierta fri-

gidez en el rigor de su caridad, el doctor Middleton se detuvo, habló y se detuvo: tartamudeó. Las damas, dijo, eran famosas envenenadoras en la Edad Media. Su opinión era que tenemos una clase de comerciantes de vino que vigilan a las viudas de este país. Pero estaba obligado a afirmar que se había despertado a su hora sin que lo asaltara el dolor de cabeza. Por otra parte, esa era una condición de bendición que no había anticipado cuando se fue a la cama. El señor Whitford, sin embargo, no debía pensar que albergaba rencor contra el vino. Fue dispensado con la honorable intención de la alegría. Execrable en cuanto al sabor, a tenor de los resultados fue inocuo.

—La prueba será el efecto que surta en el profesor Crooklyn y en su aparición esta mañana de acuerdo con lo prometido.

El doctor Middleton puso fin a sus precarios equilibrios.

—Si vuelvo a oír que ocho o doce vientos soplaron a la vez sobre el andén y la joven que se secaba bebiendo brandy con agua con un caballero en la posada de la estación, solicitaré que usted sancione mi condena del vino como antibáquico y como un presentimiento falso. No me malinterprete. Nuestra anfitriona no es responsable. Pero las viudas deberían casarse.

—Tendrá que detener al profesor, señor, si ataca a su anfitriona de ese modo —dijo Vernon.

—¡Las viudas deberían casarse! —repitió el doctor Middleton.

Murmuró que se oponía a estar a discreción de un mayordomo, salvo —tuvo cuidado en añadir— que el empleado mencionado se jactara de una educación universitaria e incluso entonces, dijo, haría falta una serie de ancestros para adiestrar el gusto de un hombre.

El reverendo doctor sofocó un bostezo. Reprimirlo causó otro, un verdadero monstruo, grande como nuestro viejo amigo el mar avanzando sobre la bella encadenada.

Desconcertado por esa maldita prueba de indigestión, su rostro mostró que consideraba que había sido demasiado benevolente con el vino de una anfitriona sin marido. Frunció terriblemente el ceño.

En el intervalo, Leticia le contó a Vernon la huida de Crossjay, apresurándose a pedirle al maestro que lo excusara: no tenía tiempo para insinuar los motivos de la excusa. Vernon la adivinó.

El doctor Middleton lo cogió del brazo y descargó una andanada sobre la erudición malhumorada del profesor Crooklyn. Para confutarlo con un libro, dirigió su marcha hacia la biblioteca. Habiéndose persuadido de que tenía dispepsia, se había vuelto irascible. Se declaró en contra de cenar fuera de casa, elogió Patterne Hall como si fuera su hogar y recordó que había soñado esa noche, una señal de lo más humillante de turbación física.

—Pero déjeme encontrar una casa cerca de Patterne, como creo suponer que encontraré —dijo— y aquí me encontrarán cuando haya revuelo en el extranjero.

Leticia se fue a su habitación. Estaba complacientemente ansiosa, lo suficiente como para preferir la soledad y la lectura. Le preocupaba mucho más Crossjay que ninguno de los otros. Era seguro que Clara hablaría con precisión y un caballero no podría oponérsele. Willoughby suplicaría. ¿Cedería ella? No podía esperarse de una joven que le había dado la espalda a sir Willoughby. Sus inferiores tendrían una oportunidad mejor. Cualesquiera que fueran las faltas de Willoughby, tenía ese elemento de grandeza que excluía la intercesión de la piedad. Suplicar sería en él una forma de condescender. Estaba por verse. El suyo era un orgullo monumental que no podía rebajarse. Leticia había conservado esa imagen del caballero como una reliquia en el naufragio de su idolatría. Meditó entre las líneas de su libro y acabó su lectura, marcando la página. Echó una mirada al césped. El doctor Middleton estaba allí, solo; con las manos a la espalda y la cabeza inclinada. Su paso meditabundo y la involuntaria atención prestada a la turba proclamaban que un jurado no sentimental en su interior había emitido un veredicto no benevolente sobre el vino de la viuda. Leticia se apresuró a encontrar a Vernon.

Estaba en el vestíbulo. Cuando se acercaba, la puerta del laboratorio se abrió y se cerró.

—¡Está decidido! —dijo Leticia.

Vernon estaba más pálido de lo que indicaría una perfecta calma.

—Quiero saber si he de seguirle los pasos a Crossjay y esquivar al profesor —dijo.

Hablaban en voz baja, vigilando furtivamente la puerta.

—Deseo lo que ella desee, estoy segura, pero le irá mal al muchacho —dijo Leticia.

—Oh bien, entonces me lo llevaré —dijo Vernon—. Lo preferiría. Creo que puedo manejarlo.

De nuevo la puerta del laboratorio se abrió. Esta vez se cerró detrás de la señorita Middleton. Estaba completamente enrojecida. Al verlos, se sacudió la tormenta de su ceño con una sonrisa descompuesta: la actitud de serenidad más clara que podía adoptar en público.

Cogió aire antes de moverse.

Vernon salió precipitadamente de la casa.

Clara se acercó a Leticia.

—¡Estaba engañada!

El duro sollozo de ira se expresó con su voz.

Leticia le pidió que la acompañara a su habitación.

—Necesito aire: debo ser yo misma —dijo Clara, cogiendo su sombrero de jardín.

Salió rápidamente hacia los escalones del porche y giró a la derecha para evitar las puertas vidrieras del laboratorio.

XXXIII

En el que la musa cómica se fija en dos buenas almas

CLARA se encontró a Vernon en los bolos del césped entre los laureles. Le preguntó dónde estaba su padre.

—No hable ahora con él —dijo Vernon.

—Señor Whitford, ¿lo hará usted?

—No es aconsejable ahora. Espere.

—¿Esperar? ¿Por qué no ahora?

—No está del humor adecuado.

A Clara le chocó la respuesta. Hay momentos en los que no encontramos medicina en los sabios; necesitamos esclavos. Rehusamos contemporizar, hemos de sobrellevarlo. Clara siguió adelante, como si hubiera cometido el error de intercambiar palabras con un poste.

La escena entre ella y Willoughby era una espesa niebla en su cabeza, salvo la carga y el resultado de ella, que retenía con fuerza y del que no quería desprenderse.

¡Oh hombres, hombres! Asombraban a la muchacha; no podía definirlos de una manera comprensible. Sus motivos, sus gustos, su vanidad, su tiranía y el atuendo de su vanidad, lo escueto de su tiranía, la constreñían a un antagonismo femenino al poder animal. No estaba menos dispuesta a la rebelión por un sentido de la justicia de lo que podría decirse para reprobarla. Solo tenía una respuesta: «¡Cualquier cosa excepto casarme con él!» Ese sentido la devolvía a su propia naturaleza, nuestro último y más obstinado abogado, rápido como un torrente en hacer que descendamos desde las alturas a nuestro nivel, y más abajo, si hay huecos en el canal. Digamos que somos culpables de mala conducta: ¿podríamos redimirlo violando lo que somos y por lo que vivimos? La cuestión nos sepulta en la suntuosidad de una alegre renuncia al esfuerzo contra la marea. Nuestra naturaleza se hace ingeniosa en recursos, penetra los movimientos del enemigo, menciona confiadamente su causa para ser francamente élfica o algo peor. Clara vio un modo particular de forzarla a rendirse. Cerró los ojos: la vista la empujaba con demasiada violencia en su huida, pero su corazón vitoreó. Presionando con las puntas de sus dedos en su pecho, levantó la mirada al cielo y gritó: «¡No soy mía, soy suya!», una instigación suficiente para hacer que su corazón diera un vuelco con toda la fuerza de su cuerpo hasta la temeridad. Una desesperada criatura podría decir que se ha dirigido al cielo y no ha obtenido respuesta que la refrene.

Felizmente para la señorita Middleton había caminado varios minutos irritada antes de que el ojo de halcón del coronel De Craye la viera alejarse por un otero poblado de hayas.

Vernon estaba indeciso. No era desde luego el momento de turbar la compostura del doctor Middleton. Meditó una conversación, tan amistosa como fuera posible, con Willoughby. Dando vueltas al césped, vio a Willoughby con el doctor Middleton, que se detuvo a prestar atención a su excelente anfitrión. Inadvertido u olvidado por ambos, Vernon se volvió a Leticia y caminó hablando con ella de cosas corrientes hasta donde pudo soportar oír las alabanzas de su pura abnegación, prueba de lo bien que se había ocultado, pero todo ello olía desagradablemente para él. Su humorística intimidad con la mente humana hacía que la fuente de su disgusto se pareciera al galante todo o nada del jugador, que odia tener poco cuando no puede tener mucho y preferiría merodear por las mesas sin blanca que sufrir la ruina de contentarse con migajas de la fortuna que se ha jugado y perdido. Si no vamos a ser amados, ahorrémonos la moneda pequeña de los halagos del carácter, especialmente cuando solo halagan nuestros actos. Es parcialmente soportable ganarse los elogios de nuestra firmeza al perder, pero Leticia era inconsciente de que él había perdido una apuesta, de modo que no podía alabarlo por sus méritos.

—Willoughby perdonará condicionalmente a Crossjay —dijo Vernon— y la persona que se haga cargo de él tendrá que garantizar los términos. ¿Cómo podía imaginar usted que Willoughby la dejaría? ¿Quién...? Es fácil decir que debería. No he sido testigo de la escena entre ellos, pero podría haber previsto el final; casi podría relatar los pasajes. La consecuencia es que todo depende de la cantidad de valor que ella tenga. El doctor Middleton aún no quiere marcharse de Patterne. Es inútil hablar hoy con él. Ella es impaciente por naturaleza y está casi desesperada.

—¿Por qué es inútil hablar con el doctor Middleton hoy? —dijo Leticia.

—Ayer bebió un vino que no le gustó. No puede trabajar. Hoy anda en busca del oporto de Patterne. No es probable que atienda a ninguna proposición de marcharse hoy.

—¡Por Dios!

—¡Conozco la profundidad de ese grito!

—*Usted* está excluido, señor Whitford.

—No del todo. Como los demás. Digamos que los hombres merecen la exclamación. Los hombres tienen derecho a esperar que sepamos lo que queremos cuando hacemos un trato. No conocemos el mundo ni a nosotros mismo, es cierto; sin embargo, el error original es nuestro y hemos de poner atención en ello. Ella trajo aquí a su padre y, antes de que él se hubiera establecido cómodamente, ella deseaba desplazarlo.

—No puedo explicarlo; no puedo comprenderlo —dijo Leticia.

—Usted es la constancia.

—No —se ruborizó—. Soy *como los demás* . No digo que no hubiera hecho lo mismo. Pero sé que no debo juzgarla. Puedo flaquear.

Volvió a ruborizarse. Estaba ansiosa por que Vernon supiera que no era la estúpida estatua de la constancia que adoraba en un rincón al antiguo engaño. Las reminiscencias de la entrevista nocturna hacían que fuera opresivo para ella oír sus alabanzas como si fuera siempre una aguja imantada. Su nueva individualidad emancipada presionaba para afirmar su existencia. Sin embargo, Vernon, sin ver esa novedad, continuaba, para disgusto de Leticia, hilvanando su imagen abandonada con sus alabanzas, que la inhibían. Además, Vernon sintió de repente envidia de su duradera constancia sentimental, resignada y casi sin aspiraciones. Si conocemos a los enamorados cuando no tienen motivo para ser felices, recordaremos que, con ese humor de envidia admirativa, son susceptibles de accesos de incontrolables divagaciones. La alabanza de la constancia, además, arrojaba una sombra de inconstancia suficiente para que pareciera arrugar la suavidad de Leticia sin ofenderla. Vernon encontró consuelo en ello y la pobre Leticia se avergonzó. Sin proponerse replicar, se aferró instintivamente a un arma defensiva al exaltar la devoción de Vernon, lo que le obligó a elevar su cabeza al cielo e implorar que la iluminara parcialmente. Pero divagaba y recurrió a ello de una manera tan impropia de sí mismo que Leticia lo miró a la cara. Se preguntó si podía haber algo oculto tras el eterno tema de la constancia. Vernon interpretó su mirada despejada como un emplazamiento a la sinceridad y fue sincero. Leticia podría haberse alejado de él, pero pensar en alejarse era pensar qué poco la urgía a alejarse y, sin embargo, el pensamiento de quedarse y escuchar alabanzas inmerecidas sin adulación era una tortura.

—Señor Whitford, no puedo compararme con usted.

—Yo lo hago y la pongo a usted como ejemplo para mí, señorita Dale.

—Se equivoca; no me conoce.

—Podría decir lo mismo. ¡Desde hace años!

—¡Se lo ruego, señor Whitford!

—Bueno, he admirado su constancia. Nos ha enseñado abnegación.

—¡Un eco sería una réplica para usted!

—¿Para mí? No pienso en otra cosa.

—Podría decir lo mismo.

—Usted es consciente por necesidad de no desviarse.

—Pero lo hago, vacilo terriblemente; no soy la misma dos días seguidos.

—Es usted la misma, con *encantadoras divisiones* de lo mismo.

—Y usted sin las *divisiones* . Extraigo mi punto de apoyo del que usted me proporciona.

—De un simulacro, entonces. Eso le muestra el poco apoyo que necesita.

—No solo le doy mi opinión.

—¿La de quién más?

—No estoy sola.

—¡Déjeme decirle de nuevo que me gustaría ser como usted!

—Entonces déjeme añadir que voluntariamente me prestaría al intercambio.

—Se sorprendería con el trato.

—Otros lo harían.

—El intercambio me daría las cualidades que me faltan, señorita Dale.

—Negativas, pasivas a lo sumo, señor Whitford. Yo tendría...

—¡Oh perdóneme! Causa usted las sensaciones de un muchacho, con cierta dosis de honradez, llamado a recibir un premio que ha ganado usando con destreza una chuleta.

—¿Y cómo supone usted que se siente alguien a quien le han puesto una corona de reina de mayo en la cabeza cuando se acerca a noviembre?

Vernon rechazó su analogía y ella la suya. Ninguno de los dos podía arrojar luz sobre las circunstancias que habían hecho insoportable su recíproca admiración. Cuanto más la exaltaba él por su constancia, más se inclinaba ella a examinar críticamente el objeto de esa virtud imaginaria, y cuanto más lo alababa ella por poseer el espíritu de la perfecta amistad, con más fiereza crecía en él la pasión que desdeñaba la impu-

tación, silbando como una barra de hierro al rojo vivo al ser introducida en el agua. No era nada de eso: habría preferido quedar expuesto en su profunda estupidez.

Por amables que fueran y por mutuo que fuera su afecto, tuvieron que detenerse en su paseo, anhelando separarse sin ver cómo podían hacerlo; se habían entretejido entre sí con la abundancia de sus elogios.

—Creo que debo ir a casa a ver a mi padre —dijo Leticia.

—Yo debería estar trabajando —dijo Vernon.

Era un progreso para destejer la guirnalda; sin embargo, era una pareja profundamente civilizada y una transición abrupta de la floración a los lugares comunes los afectaba, sobre todo a Leticia, que había interrumpido la pausa y que observó:

—En mis opiniones soy realmente la constancia.

—Otro título es el acostumbrado cuando se trata de opiniones firmes. Tal vez se dé cuenta poco a poco de su error y entonces admitirá el nombre que tiene.

—¿Cómo? —dijo Leticia—. ¿De qué he de darme cuenta?

—¿Si se da cuenta de que soy un Egoísta espeluznante?

—¿Usted? No sería egoísmo —añadió Leticia, revelándole a Vernon, al mismo tiempo que a sí misma, que pendía de una conjetura apenas creíble.

—¿No oye algo, señor Whitford?

Vernon oyó la voz intrusa, pero estaba borrando las nebulosas letras que Leticia había empezado a decir y tartamudeó con un tono prosaico: «Precisamente eso y nada mejor». Luego se volvió a la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson.

—¿O ha decidido que no verá al profesor Crooklyn cuando lo tenga delante? —dijo la gran dama.

Vernon saludó al profesor y se disculpó evasiva y rápidamente, de manera incoherente y con el rostro enrojecido, lo que indujo a la señora Mountstuart a escudriñar el de Leticia.

Tras sermonear a Vernon por haberla abandonado la noche anterior e incumplir sus propósitos, volvió a los asuntos del día.

—Hemos caminado desde las puertas para ver el parque y prepararnos para el doctor Middleton. Anoche nos separamos en medio de una controversia y estamos ansiosos por retomarla. ¿Dónde está nuestro formidable antagonista?

La señora Mountstuart pasó alrededor del profesor Crooklyn para acompañar a Vernon.

—Nosotros —dijo— somos partidarios de la moderna erudición inglesa, opuesta al campeón de la alemana.

—Al contrario —observó el profesor Crooklyn.

—Oh. Nosotros —corrigió el error serenamente— somos partidarios de la erudición alemana, opuesta a la inglesa.

—En algunas ediciones.

—Defendemos algunas ediciones.

—Defender es un término de aplicación imperfecta a mi posición, madam.

—Mi querido profesor, tiene usted en el doctor Middleton un compañero en la pugnacidad escrupulosa y no debe malgastarla conmigo. Allí, allí están; allí está. El señor Whitford lo llevará. Me mantengo alejada del primer golpe.

La señora Mountstuart se volvió a Leticia, diciendo:

—Descubre una leve inexactitud en las frases y la picotea como un ave de corral.

La actitud y el aire del profesor Crooklyn habían sido descritos tan bien que Leticia podría haber reído.

—Esos eruditos imponentes tienen su toque —se apresuró a añadir la gran dama para que su compañera más joven no supusiera que no eran valiosos para una anfitriona—. Sus luchas contra las sombras son ridículas, pero tienen su toque en la mesa. Anoche no: descarto toda mención de anoche. Fracasamos: como nadie en esta vecindad podría fracasar, pero fracasamos. Si tenemos entre nosotros una joven cormorán que devora todo el —¡ja!— brandy con agua de nuestras posadas y ocupa todos los calesines, vaya, pues nuestra condición es anormal y ha de esperarse que fracasemos: carecemos de acomodo para las circunstancias accidentales. ¿Cómo pudo privarse el señor Whitford de ver al profesor Crooklyn? ¿Qué estaba haciendo *él* en la estación, señorita Dale?

—Su descripción del profesor Crooklyn fue demasiado impresionante, señora Mountstuart, y su excelencia lo confundió. Parece no haber visto más que la pizarra en blanco.

—Ah. Es un amigo fiel de su primo, ¿no cree?

—Es el más fiel de los amigos.

—En cuanto al doctor Middleton —dijo la señora Mountstuart, apartándose de su interrogación—, hará que las letras de mi vocabulario aumenten hasta alcanzar proporciones gigantescas si lo veo con frecuencia: es contagioso.

—Creo que es una forma de su humor.

—Lo capté ayer en mi mesa cuando estaba disgustada, lo que ha de pasar por una forma del mío, mientras dure. Le hablé al doctor Middleton durante la mitad de la noche apoyada en mi almohada. ¡Su opinión, querida, vamos! En cuanto a mí, no tengo dudas. Pareció que nos hubiéramos sentado para tocar a solas la viola de gamba. Una asamblea de insectos durante la tormenta. Agradecí de corazón al coronel De Craye sus diversiones, peo no oía a nadie salvo al doctor Middleton. Me pareció como si mi mesa se hubiera petrificado y todos estuviéramos escuchando jugar a los bolos.

—Yo me divertí.

—¿De verdad? Me complace usted. ¿Quién sabe si mis invitados fueron sinceros en sus felicitaciones por una velada lograda? ¡Ya ve hasta qué punto he caído! Ya sé, ¡pobre gente!, que suele ser su modo de condolerse. Yo misma lo hago, pero solo donde hay esfuerzos amables. Pero ¡imagine que *me* felicitan por eso! Buenos días, sir Willoughby. ¡El peor de los infractores! Y no estoy de buen humor con él —le dijo aparte la señora Mountstuart a Leticia, que se dio la vuelta para retirarse.

Sir Willoughby avanzó uno o dos pasos. Se detuvo para ver la figura de Leticia deslizarse hacia la casa.

Así como, por ejemplo, junto a una corriente, una flor en la superficie extiende sus pétalos que se hunden en la clara corriente, ejercemos nosotros nuestro privilegio de estar al margen en la contemplación encantada de un hermoso incidente natural.

Una sonrisa de abstracción complacida se dibujó en los rasgos de Willoughby.

XXXIV

La señora Mountstuart y sir Willoughby

—BUENOS días, mi querida señora Mountstuart.

Sir Willoughby se despertó para dirigirse a la gran dama.

—¿Por qué ha huido?

—¿Ha huido alguien?

—Leticia Dale.

—¿Letty Dale? ¡Oh! Si llama a eso huir. Posiblemente para retomar una íntima conversación con Vernon Whitford que yo he interrumpido. Me había asustado con su tono pastoril. Lléveme a alguno de sus asientos en el jardín donde no oiga al doctor Middleton, por favor. Me hipnotiza, me hace hablar en latín. Anoche estuve curiosamente susceptible. Sé que lo asociaré para siempre con un entretenimiento abortado y solos de grandes instrumentos. Fuimos planos.

—Horacio estaba lanzado.

—Usted no.

—Y Leticia... La señorita Dale habló bien, creo.

—Habló con usted y, sin duda, lo hizo bien. No nos mezclamos. La levadura era mala. Usted le lanzó dardos al coronel De Craye: trató de aguijonearlo. Atrajo usted al doctor Middleton. Querido, ese hombre es una reverberación en mi cabeza. ¿Dónde está su dama y amor?

—¿Quién?

—¿Tengo que nombrarla?

—¿Clara? No le he visto en la última hora. De paseo, supongo.

—Una enramada estival muy bonita —dijo la señora Mountstuart, sentándose—. Bien, mi querido sir Willoughby, preferencias, preferencias, no hay que contar con ellas y nadie sabe si han de lamentarse o felicitarse por ellas cuando se presentan. Quiero ver a la señorita Middleton.

—Su *refinada pícara de porcelana* estará a su disposición. ¿Comerá con nosotros antes de irse?

—Así que ahora me cita, ¿no es así?

—Pero *un cuento romántico en las pestañas* ya no es una descripción.

—Una descripción ¿de quién? ¿Ahora se trata de Leticia Dale?

—La cito a usted en general. Ahora tiene una mirada más grave.

—¡Y puede tenerla!

—No es que el romance haya desaparecido del todo.

—No: parece que se haya impreso.

—Lo ha dicho usted perfectamente, como suele, madam.

Sir Willoughby meditaba.

Como quien vuelve a coger su instrumento para retomar la melodía de una pieza concertante, dijo:

—Creo que Leticia Dale tenía un aire singularmente animado anoche.

—¡Vaya!

La señora Mountstuart se quedó admirativa.

—Necesito una nueva descripción. Ya sabe, colecciono sus lemas y frases.

—Me parece que ha salido en tres cuartas partes de la concha y la lleva como una capucha por conveniencia.

—¿Dispuesta a salir al recibir una invitación? ¡Admirable! ¡Exacto!

—Ay mi buen sir Willoughby, pero ¿somos tan admirables y exactos? ¿Llegaremos a conocernos a nosotros mismos?

Emitió un suspiro polisílabo, como los que componen los poetas en lenguas felices, abundantes en una sola expresión:

—Me conozco a mí mismo. Siempre lo he hecho. El ingenio no es infrecuente en las mujeres. El intelecto es la perla. Una mujer con intelecto es tan buena como una estatua griega, divinamente labrada y divinamente rara.

—Siga —dijo la dama, confiándole al aire un acceso de tos.

—Su rareza: no es solo mero intelecto, es un intelecto simpático o un intelecto en perfecto acuerdo con una disposición intensamente simpática; su rareza lo hace demasiado precioso para ser compartido cuando

nos lo encontramos. Lo aprecio más cuanto más viejo me hago.

—¿Estamos hablando de lo femenino o del neutro?

—¿Perdón?

—¿Lo universal o lo individual?

Willoughby se encogió de hombros.

—Por lo demás, las afinidades psicológicas pueden existir en coincidencia con o completamente independientes de preocupaciones, relaciones, compromisos o vínculos materiales o morales.

—Bien, no es el rapto de la pasión, desde luego —dijo la señora Mountstuart—, y suena a una cómoda doctrina para los hombres. Con esa petición, todos ustedes podrían tener a Aspasia y a una esposa. Vimos a su hermosa Middleton y al coronel De Craye a distancia cuando entramos en el parque. El profesor Crooklyn está bajo los efectos de una alucinación.

—¿Qué podría ser más apropiado?

La rapidez y el doble sentido de la réplica le dieron al sentido cómico de la señora Mountstuart un golpe de pavor.

—El profesor tiene que oír eso. Insiste en el calesín y la posada y las botas húmedas y el brebaje caliente y el testimonio de la posadera y el empleado del ferrocarril.

—Digo qué podría ser más apropiado.

—¿Que que él insista?

—¡Si está bajo los efectos de una alucinación!

—Puede convencer a otros.

—Solo he de repetir...

—¿Qué podría ser más apropiado? Es extremadamente filosófico. Coincide con la busca de afinidades psicológicas.

—El profesor Crooklyn no descenderá, supongo, de sus alturas clásicas para exponer sus alucinaciones al doctor Middleton.

—Sir Willoughby, es usted un perfecto caballero.

Al insistir en Leticia, había animado a la señora Mountstuart a correr la cortina sobre Clara. Era ofensivo para él, pero tenía que soportar la ofensa hecha a su orgullo en aras de su plan general de protegerse a sí mismo.

—Simplemente deseoso de salvar a mis invitados de cualquier clase de fastidio —dijo Willoughby—. El doctor Middleton puede mirar al *Olimpo y el trueno,* como Vernon lo llama.

—No puede. Lo veo. ¡Esa mirada! ¡Torcida por el diccionario! ¡Furioso diccionario con cuernos! Una aparición del diccionario por la noche ¡a un asno!

—Tendríamos que desviarnos para evitar la vista!

—¡Lo que ha de ser ese hombre en una tormenta! Hable de él a su gusto: usted es un caballero sincero y galante para temerlo por ella. Pero, cándidamente ahora, ¿cómo es que no puede usted condescender a un pequeño compromiso? Escuche a una vieja amiga. Usted es demasiado señorial. Un enamorado no puede permitirse ser incomprensible durante media hora. Rebájese un poco. No hay que pensar en sermonear. Usted puede gobernar sin ser visto. Ha de saber que descreo de la filosofía en el amor. Admiro su aspecto, pero no doy crédito al supuesto. Prefiero que los enamorados se queden al margen a veces: los hace pintorescos y vivifica su monotonía. Percibo en ella una propensión al estado salvaje. Es lo más adecuado que la abandone antes de casarse.

—¿Clara? ¡El estado salvaje de una niña! —dijo Willoughby, meditando de una manera paternal sobre un escalofrío interior—. La vio a distancia hace un momento o podría haberla oído reír. Horacio la divierte de una manera excesiva.

—Le debo mi eterna gratitud por su conducta de anoche. Ella era uno de mis rostros brillantes. Su risa fue deliciosa, ¡lluvia en el desierto! Podrá adivinar la carga que pesaba sobre mí si le digo que esos dos fueron un espectáculo para mí, puntos anotados en un juego perdido. Sé que fueron ingeniosos.

—Ambos tienen ingenio, una clase de ingenio —asintió Willoughby.

—Suenan juntos como un par de címbalos.

—No es la descripción más elevada del instrumento. Sin embargo, me divierten. Me gusta oírlos cuanto estoy en vena.

—Esa vena debería estar más a su disposición, amigo mío. Podría usted ser perfecto, si quisiera.

—Siguiendo sus instrucciones.

Willoughby se inclinó lánguidamente ante ella. Su pena le era más llevadera al haber engatusado a la dama. Ella era el mundo exterior para él; podía afinar la voz del mundo, prescribir cuál de los dos había de ser compadecido, él o Clara, y no trataba de que fuera él si eso era lo peor.

Estaban lejos de eso ahora y Willoughby prosiguió:

—Probablemente el poder de un hombre para componer el rostro no sea igual al de una muchacha. Detesto las disensiones domésticas. Probablemente lo muestre cuando no esté todo tan liso. Las leves punzadas de sospecha me incomodan. Es una debilidad no quitárselas de encima, lo sé. Los hombres han de aprender las artes que las mujeres tienen por naturaleza. No simpatizo con la sospecha por no tener ninguna yo mismo.

Arqueó las cejas. El ominoso Flitch avanzaba furtivamente a través de los arbustos a pocos pasos de él.

Flitch se defendió enseguida de la acusación de estar borracho, que le cayó encima para explicar su audacia al transgredir la prohibición, pero admitió que había tomado «algo» para fortificarse al visitar los lugares donde había sido feliz: ¡en Navidad, cuando todos los sirvientes, con el mayordomo a la cabeza, el viejo y ceniciento señor Chessington, se sentaban en bancos, brindando por el joven heredero de la vieja mansión con oporto añejo! Había sido feliz entonces, antes de que ambicionar una tienda, para ser su propio amo y un caballero independiente, lo hubiera llevado a la ciénaga: a mirar atrás con envidia a un perro en la vieja hacienda y suspirar por el aroma de los establos de Patterne, más dulce que los perfumes de Arabia, parecía decir su goteante nariz.

Flitch llevaba consigo algo que impuso silencio a sir Willoughby de una manera tan eficaz como un astuto exordio retórico obliga a las multitudes a tragarse lo que no les resulta halagüeño, y Flitch lo exhibía, seguro de que era la licencia para manejarse con su abominable patetismo. Sir Willoughby reconoció la bolsa de Clara. Entendió enseguida cómo había dado con ella, pero no fue tan rápido en procurarse los medios para detener el cuento. Flitch frustró sus planes. «Intacta», respondió a la pregunta: «¿Qué tienes ahí?» Repitió su gran palabra. Luego se volvió a la señora Mountstuart para hablar del Paraíso y de Adán, en quien veía el prototipo de sí mismo; también en el pueblo judío cautivo en Egipto del que hablaban los clérigos, no sin un parecido consigo mismo.

—Los pesares me han hecho bueno y me han enviado a la iglesia, señora —dijo Flitch—, cuando podría haberme ido a Londres, el hogar del cochero, y emplearme en alguna honorable familia, sin ventaja para mi moral, según lo que he oído decir. Una bolsa encontrada bajo el asiento de un calesín en Londres habría sido una pobre ocasión para devolverla *intacta* a la joven dama que la hubiera perdido.

—Ponla en aquella silla; se investigará y verá usted a sir Willoughby —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. Intacta, sin duda; no hay discusión.

Con un movimiento del dedo hizo que el hombre se diera la vuelta. Flitch se detuvo: le pesaba dar por acabada la fiesta de su patetismo y quería contar el hallazgo de la bolsa, pero no pudo encontrar la mirada de la señora Mountstuart; se alejó encorvado con un gran parecido al Adán expulsado de los libros ilustrados.

—Mi creencia es que la naturalidad entre la gente corriente ha abandonado el reino —dijo.

Willoughby se disculpó caritativamente por él.

—Estaba aturdido.

La celosa consideración de la dama había deparado al sensible caballero un golpe, que le daba a entender con claridad que ella tenía sus propias ideas respecto a su situación. La agudeza superior y su ejercicio de autoridad en su propio terreno no lo habían herido menos.

Willoughby dijo osadamente, mientras sopesaba la bolsa y la sacudía:

—No es muy distinta a la de Clara.

Temió que sus labios y sus mejillas se crisparan y, conforme se fue haciendo consciente de una transparencia que reflejaría cualquier sospecha de una mujer penetrante, se hizo más osado aún:

—Sé que no es la de Leticia. La suya es antigua.

—¿Un regalo suyo?

—¿Cómo lo ha sabido, mi querida señora?

—Deductivamente.

—Bien, la bolsa parece tan buena como nueva, como la propietaria.

—La pobre no ha tenido muchas ocasiones de usarla.

—Se equivoca: la usa todos los días.

—Si estuviera más llena, sir Willoughby, su antiguo plan podría llevarse a cabo. Las partes no parecen tan reacias. El profesor Crooklyn y yo hemos dado con ellos más bien por sorpresa y le aseguro que sus cabezas estaban cerca, cara a cara, con los ojos pensativos.

—Imposible.

—Porque cuando se aproximaran al punto, ¡usted no lo permitiría! ¡Egoísta!

—Entonces —dijo Willoughby, muy animado— pregunte a Clara. Hágalo, mi querida señora Mountstuart, hable con Clara de esa cabeza; la convencerá de que me he esforzado hace muy poco, contra mí mismo, si quiere. La he instruido para que me ayude, le he dado plenas instrucciones, *carte blanche* . Posiblemente *ella* no tenga dudas. Puedo recurrir a ella para que remueva cualquiera que usted albergue al respec-

to. He propuesto, secundado y coreado, y *no* se dispondrá. Si usted espera de mí que deplore el hecho, solo puedo responder que mis acciones están bajo mi control; mis sentimientos no lo están. Haré todo cuanto sea coherente con los deberes de un hombre de honor, que incurre perpetuamente en errores fatales porque no consulta como es debido los dictados de esos sentimientos con la recta razón. Puedo violarlos, pero no puedo regirlos más de lo que rijo mi destino. Fueron aplastados hace mucho tiempo; dejémoslo así. No discutiremos los sentimientos, aunque usted sabe que mis sentimientos tienen relieve en la vida social: son factores, como dicen en la jerga reciente. No hablo de los míos. A usted podría. No es necesario. Si el viejo Vernon, en lugar de aplanar su pecho en un escritorio, tuviera una ambición masculina de participar en los asuntos públicos, ella sería la mujer adecuada para él. La he llamado mi Egeria. Ella sería su Cornelia. ¡Podríamos jurar de ella que tendría una noble descendencia! Pero el viejo Vernon se ha llevado una decepción y lo lamentará hasta el final. ¿Y ella? Eso parece. Lo he intentado; sí, personalmente; sin efecto. En otras materias tengo influencia sobre ella; en esa no. Ella la rechaza. Ella vivirá y morirá siendo Leticia Dale. Estamos solos: le confieso que amo el nombre. Es una vieja canción en mis oídos. No se disponga a hacer algo con un nombre para *mí* . Créame —hablo por mi experiencia hasta ahora—, hay una fatalidad en esas cosas. No puedo ocultar a mi pobre muchacha que esa fatalidad existe...

—¿Cuál es la pobre muchacha ahora? —dijo la señora Mountstuart, indiferente a la perplejidad.

—Y aunque ella le diga que la he autorizado y —Clara Middleton— haga todo cuanto un hombre puede hacer para instituir la unión que usted sugiere, confesará que es consciente de la presencia de esa fatalidad —la llamo así a falta de un título mejor— entre nosotros, que la empuja a ella en una dirección y a mí en otra, o lo haría, si yo cediera a la presión. No es la primera que ha sido consciente de ello.

—¿Incluimos a una tercera pobre muchacha? —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. ¡Ah! Recuerdo, y recuerdo que solíamos llamarlo tira y afloja en aquellos días, no fatalidad. Es muy extraño. Tal vez fuera usted cortejado desvergonzadamente en aquellos días, de manera excusable, y supusiéramos... Pero usted se fue de viaje.

—La receta médica de mi madre para mí. En parte tuvo éxito. Ella estaba hecha para grandes matrimonios: yo no. Yo podía hacer, no podía ser, un sacrificio. A su debido tiempo acudí al doctor Cupido por mi cuenta. Ella tiene esa clase de atracción... Pero ¡cambiamos! *On revient toujours.* Primero empezamos con el gusto; luego nos entregamos a la pasión por la belleza; luego viene la grave cuestión de lo apropiado de la pareja y tal vez descubrimos que éramos más sabios en la temprana juventud que después. Sin embargo, tiene belleza. Usted, señora Mountstuart, la admira. Deseche la idea de la *pícara refinada:* usted la admira; es cautivadora; tiene un encanto particular, tiene una belleza real.

La señora Mountstuart se le encaró y le dijo:

—A fe mía, mi querido sir Willoughby, creo que la tiene hasta tal punto que no conozco al hombre que resistiera si ella ocupara el campo. Es insuperable. Ya sea por lo que dice o por sus ojos, o por una efusión y una atmósfera, lo que sea, es un hechizo, ¡otra fatalidad para usted!

—¡Animal, no espiritual!

—¡Oh! No tiene la cabeza de Letty Dale.

Sir Willoughby permitió que la señora Mountstuart hiciera una pausa y continuara con sus pensamientos.

—¡Querido! —exclamó—. Anoche advertí un cambio en Letty Dale y hoy también. Parecía más fresca y más joven, extremadamente afable, lo que no puedo decir de usted, amigo mío. El fatalismo no es bueno para la tez.

—¡No me quite salud, se lo ruego! —respondió Willoughby, riéndose de golpe.

—Tenga cuidado —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. Tiene usted un tono sentimental. Habla usted de *sentimientos aplastados hace mucho tiempo* . Está usted hablando con una mujer, no con un hombre, pero esa forma de hablar es una manera de hacer resbaladizo el terreno. Escucho en vano una lengua natural y, cuando no la oigo, sospecho que los hombres traman algo. Muestra usted los dientes inferiores demasiadas veces cuando respira, como un condenado hindú de una casta superior que mi marido me llevó a ver en una cárcel de Calcuta para excitarme cuando yo quería volver a Inglaterra. La criatura lo hacía regularmente mientras respiraba; usted lo hizo anoche y lo ha estado haciendo hoy, como si el aire le hiriera en lo más vivo. Le han despojado. Ha sido ungido en demasía. Lo que acabo de mencionar es una señal para mí de que algo se ha asentado en el cerebro de un hombre.

—¿El cerebro? —dijo sir Willoughby, frunciendo el ceño.

—Sí, se ríe usted amargamente al verlo —dijo ella—. Mountstuart me decía que los músculos de la boca traicionan al hombre antes que los ojos cuando está inquieto.

—Pero, madam, no he exhalado mi palabra; no lo haré, no; intento, he decidido, guardarla. *No* soy fatalista, sea negra o blanca mi tez. A pesar de mi parecido con un malhechor de una casta superior de las prisiones de Calcuta...

—¡Amigo! ¡Amigo! Ya sabe que parloteo.

Willoughby besó las puntas de los dedos de la dama.

—A pesar de la extraordinaria exhibición de los dientes, me verá ir a la ejecución con perfecta calma, con una resignación tan buena como la felicidad.

—Como un jacobita bajo los Jorges.

—Usted me dijo que lloró al leer la vida de uno de ellos: como él, entonces. Mis principios no han cambiado, aunque yo lo haya hecho. Cuando era más joven tenía la idea de una esposa que estuviera conmigo en mis pensamientos y propósitos: una mujer con un espíritu de romance y un cerebro de sentido sólido. Antes o después me dedicaré a la vida pública y necesitaré, supongo, el consejero o consolador que ha de encontrarse siempre en el hogar. Podría ser desafortunado que tuviera el ideal en mi cabeza. Pero no planteo nunca exigencias rigurosas para cualidades específicas. Lo más cruel del mundo es diseñar un modelo de vida antes de tener esposa y obligarla a copiarlo. En cualquier caso, aquí estamos, en el camino: la suerte está echada. No me retiraré. No puedo liberarla. El matrimonio representa hechos, el cortejo fantasías. Se curará poco a poco de esa codicia de todo cuanto yo siento, creo, sueño, imagino... Ta-ta-ta *ad infinitum* . Invité aquí a Leticia para que le mostrara el ejemplo de un carácter fijo, sólido como cualquier sustancia concreta con la que usted elija edificar y en modo alguno menos femenino.

—Ta-ta-ta *ad infinitum* . No necesita decirme que tiene un propósito en todo lo que hace, Willoughby Patterne.

—¿Huele al autócrata? Sí, puede moldear y gobernar a las criaturas que lo rodean. ¡Su rebelde más obstinado es él mismo! Si viera a Clara... Quería verla, creo que dijo.

—Su conducta con lady Busshe anoche fue rara.

—Si quiere. Torció el gesto por la porcelana. *Toujours la porcelaine!* Para mí, sus enfados forman parte de su encanto, lo confieso. Diez años más joven, no habría podido compararlas.

—¿A quiénes?

—A Leticia y a Clara.

—Sir Willoughby, en cualquier caso, para citar sus palabras, aquí estamos, en el camino, y hemos de obrar como si los acontecimientos fueran a suceder y debo pedirle ayuda a Clara sobre mi regalo de bodas, pues no quiero que tuerza el gesto con el mío, por hermoso que sea cuando lo haga, y lo hace muy bien.

—¡Otro ofrecimiento dedicado a la *pícara* que hay en mí!, dice de la porcelana.

—Entonces no será porcelana. Quiero consultarlo con ella. He venido decidida a charlar con ella. Creo que entiendo. Pero ella causa una impresión falsa en aquellos que no conocen a los dos. Lady Busshe me dijo que devolverá la porcelana cuando nos despedimos anoche. Creo —dijo— que debería haber seguido el Patrón del Sauce y realmente dijo: ¡Lo dejarán plantado otra vez! [49] .

Sir Willoughby contuvo un sobresalto de su cuerpo que lo habría elevado varios pies en el aire. Sintió que un trueno recorría su cráneo.

—¡En lugar de eso caerá sobre ella! —exclamó, corrigiendo su parecido con el reo de casta superior tan pronto como lo recordó.

—Pero usted conoce a lady Busshe —dijo la señora Mountstuart, genuinamente solícita de aliviar el pesar del orgulloso hombre. Podía ver a través de él hasta la profundidad de su piel, que su sensibilidad en guardia trataba de cubrir en vano como hacía su corazón—. Lady Busshe no es nadie sin sus vuelos, modas y fantasías. Siempre ha insistido en que tiene usted una nariz desafortunada. La recuerdo diciendo el día de su mayoría de edad que era la nariz de un monarca destinado a perder un trono.

—¿He ofendido alguna vez a lady Busshe?

—Bebe los vientos por usted. Arrastra consigo a lady Culmer y puede usted esperar una visita de asentimientos, insinuaciones y vasos de alabastro. Lo adoran: usted es la esperanza de Inglaterra a sus ojos y ninguna mujer es digna de usted, pero son un par de fatalistas y, si usted empieza con Letty Dale con ellas, será como prohibir sus amonestaciones. Recorrerán el país hablando de la predestinación y los matrimonios hechos en el cielo.

—¡Clara y su padre! —exclamó sir Willoughby.

El doctor Middleton y su hija aparecieron en el círculo de arbustos y flores.

—Tráigamela y sálveme del políglota —dijo la señora Mountstuart, temerosa de la manera como el doctor Middleton hablaba al oído de la abatida muchacha.

El ocio con el que habría querido debatir con su genio el paso siguiente le fue negado a Willoughby: debía poner su confianza en la habilidad con la que había preparado el entendimiento de la señora Mountstuart para encontrarse con la muchacha, ¡hermosa y aborrecida como era!, ¡querida y detestada!, ¡algo con lo que estremecerse hasta la muerte, arrojar al polvo y lamentarse!

Tenía que arriesgarse justo cuando el pronóstico de lady Busshe se había grabado penosamente en su aprensiva naturaleza.

Como la noción de un deber desagradable que tenía el doctor Middleton en un coloquio era entregar todo cuanto contuviera, y escapar de toda sílaba de réplica, Willoughby se llevó a su hija oportunamente.

—La señora Mountstuart te necesita, Clara.

—Me hará muy feliz —respondió Clara, y cambió de cara.

Un imperceptible estremecimiento nervioso fue contrarrestado por otra fuerza en el pecho de Clara que la empujó sin señal alguna de reluctancia. Parecía brillar.

Quedó en manos de la señora Mountstuart.

El doctor Middleton puso su mano sobre el hombro de Willoughby y se inclinó ante la gran dama del distrito. Resopló y dijo:

—Una oposición entre los instintos femeninos y el intelecto masculino crea necesariamente un antagonismo entre el intelecto y el instinto.

—¿La respuesta de ella, señor? ¿Sus razones? ¿Ha dado alguna?

—El gato —dijo el doctor Middleton, tomando aliento para la frase— que se encorva en forma de letra H, o de puente chino, ha dado al perro su respuesta y sus razones, podríamos asumir, pero quien se proponga traducirlo al discurso humano podría del mismo modo aventurarse a proponer una adición al alfabeto y una continuación de Homero. Cualquiera de esas cosas sería más asombrosa que la anterior. ¡Hijas, Willoughby, hijas! Por encima de los pecados más humanos, aborrezco que se traicione la confianza. Ella no será culpable de eso. Exijo un cumplimiento jovial de la palabra dada y suspiro al pensar que no puedo contar con ello sin dar una lección.

—Pronto estará a mi cuidado, señor.

—Lo estará. Vaya, es tan buena como casada. Está en el altar. Está en su casa. Es, bueno, ¿qué no es? Ha entrado en el santuario. Está fuera del mercado. Ese grito menádico de libertad le daría derecho felizmente al gorro republicano —frigio— en una procesión revolucionaria parisina. Para mí no tiene sentido y, aunque no puedo acreditar en una hija mía la locura, su ingenio me inquieta.

Los temores más vivos de sir Willoughby se calmaron con la información de que Clara simplemente había emitido un grito. Clara le había dado una o dos veces motivo para sobresaltarse y considerar si debía pensar de una manera distinta en su sexo o condenarla, aunque no la juzgaba capaz de desahogarse ni siquiera con él y bajo un estado de excitación. Su idea de la cobardía de las muchachas se combinaba con su ideal de una figura de cera para persuadirlo de que, si bien son con frecuencia (lo había experimentado) impúdicamente desesperadas en sus actos, un sonrosado pudor refrena sus lenguas. Eso le era favorable. Si Clara parecía muda y tonta con la señora Mountstuart, la dama le daría la vuelta y la moldearía hasta darle cualquier forma, la despreciaría y creería cordialmente que él era el modelo de caballero de la cristiandad. Clara encajaría en la imagen que él había bosquejado, según el cual su orgullo era menor que su temprana visión de un caballero favorecido por la fortuna, triunfante, cuya carrera es como la del sol, comprensiblemente señorial. No como vuestro modelo de caballero, que ha de exponerse: ¡una cosa para la estima abstracta! Sin embargo, era la opción que le quedaba y había en ello una alternativa. El modelo de caballero de la señora Mountstuart podía casarse con una de las dos mujeres, arrojando a la otra por la borda. Estaba obligado a casarse; estaba obligado a tomar para sí una de ellas y, cualquiera que fuera la que escogiera, daría lustre a su reputación. Al menos lo rescataría de las garras de lady Busshe y su ululato de la «Pauta del Sauce» y su grito de bruja: «¡Lo dejarán plantado otra vez!». No se burlarían del indeciso infante Willoughby —su Yo desprotegido, apenas incorpóreo, omnipresente (en el que se pensaba menos que se sentía por él una marcada pasión)— como alguien sin suerte con las mujeres. ¡Una caída desde la concepción original de su famoso nombre en el extranjero! Pero Willoughby tenía el elevado consuelo de saber que otros habían caído más bajo. Hay un destino diabólico para consolarnos si sabemos regatear. *Por cada una de tus punzadas de dolor, diez atormentan otro pecho,* leemos en el libro de solaz.

Con todos estos cálculos en marcha, Willoughby se elevó sobre sí mismo, contemplando su activa maquinaria, que podía criticar en parte, pero no detener, en un asombro singular ante los propósitos y planes y temores de alguien que era encantador, viril, aceptable a los ojos del mundo y que no se habría amado a sí mismo más cordialmente si se hubiera dividido hasta el extremo de repudiar la mitad acuciante y excitada de su ser, cuyos movimientos se parecían al del cuerpo de insectos que perpetuamente erigen y reparan una estructura de extraordinaria pequeñez. Se amaba a sí mismo de una manera tan seria que permaneció en esa división durante más de un minuto. Pero, tras haberla visto, por primera vez según creía, su pasión por la mujer la sobrecargó de amargura y la volvió atrabiliaria.

Miró atrás, mientras caminaba con el doctor Middleton, y vio a Clara, astuta criatura como era, ejecutando airosamente sus maliciosas gracias en las cortesías preliminares con la señora Mountstuart.

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49 «Willow Pattern» (el Patrón del Sauce) es un juego de palabras en inglés con el nombre del protagonista, Willoughby Patterne, que alude al patrón de la porcelana inglesa más conocida y que suele reproducir un sauce como figura central. Véase Patri-

cia O'Hara, «The Willow Pattern That We Knew: The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow», en *Victorian Studies,* 36/4 (1993), págs. 421-442.

XXXV

La señorita Middleton y la señora Mountstuart

—SIÉNTESE a mi lado, hermosa Middleton —dijo la gran dama.

—Con alegría —dijo Clara, inclinándose ante su título.

—Quiero sondearla, querida.

Clara ofreció un semblante franco con una sombría interrogación en la frente.

—¿Sí? —dijo sumisamente.

—Usted fue uno de mis rostros brillantes anoche. Me enamoré de usted. Delicados recipientes encajan dulcemente en una uña y, si el ingenio es sincero, usted responde a ello; eso es lo que veo y lo que me gusta. La mayoría de las personas que reunimos en la mesa es como un tambor. Tam-tam-tam es todo el sonido que les sacamos. Cuando los persuadimos para que lo saquen entre sí, lo llaman conversación.

—El coronel De Craye fue muy divertido.

—Divertido y también ingenioso.

—Pero no malicioso.

—Esos irlandeses o medio irlandeses son de mi gusto. Si no son políticos, quiero decir: me refiero a caballeros irlandeses. No volveré a celebrar una cena sin uno de ellos. El temperamento de los nuestros es incierto. No podemos lograr que se olviden de sí mismos. Cuando el vino los riega la naturaleza sale y hay que zarandearlos, empieza la política y adiós a la armonía. Mi marido, siento decirlo, era uno de esos que tiene una larga cuenta de cenas arruinadas por su culpa. Lo he visto, a él y a sus amigos, rojos como el asado y blancos como el hervido por la ira sobre un tema popular que ellos mismos habían suscitado, que no merecía intrínsecamente que moviéramos un dedo. ¡En Londres! —exclamó la señora Mountstuart, para agravar el cargo contra su señor en las sombras—. Pero, ya sea en la ciudad o en el campo, la mesa debe ser sagrada. He oído decir a las mujeres que es una trama por parte de los hombres para enseñarnos nuestra pequeñez. No creo que hayan urdido una trama. Sería halagarlos por su talento. Creo que caen unos sobre otros ciegamente, simplemente porque están llenos: lo cual, nos dicen, es la preparación para el inglés luchador. No pueden comer y mantener una tregua. ¿Se fijó usted en el terrible señor Capes?

—¿El caballero que contradecía continuamente a papá? Pero el coronel De Craye fue tan bueno que nos libró de él.

—¿Cómo, querida?

—¿No lo oyó? Tomó ventaja en un intervalo en el que el señor Capes estaba tomando aliento después de entonar un peán por su amigo el gobernador —creo— de una de las presidencias para decirle a la dama que estaba a su lado: Fue un gran administrador y un gran lógico; se casó con una viuda angloindia y poco después publicó un panfleto a favor del *suttee* [50] .

—¿Y qué dijo la dama?

—Dijo: Oh.

—¡Qué cosas dice! ¿Lo oyeron?

—El señor Capes estuvo de acuerdo con la viuda, pero declaró que no había visto el panfleto a favor del *suttee* y no creía que existiera. Insistió en que tenía que decirse *satí* . Fue vehemente.

—Ahora lo recuerdo. Tuvo que deleitar al coronel. El señor Capes se retiró repitiendo *in toto, in toto.* ¡Como si *in toto* fuera el lenguaje de la sobremesa! Pero ¿aprenderán alguna vez los hombres? ¿Tendremos que importar franceses que les den un ejemplo en el arte de la conversación, como sus abuelos se trajeron marqueses que les instruyeran en las ensaladas? ¡También nuestros jóvenes! Las mujeres tienen que ir al coto de caza para poder hablar con ellos y estar a la par de sus palafreneros. Ahora bien, estaba Willoughby Patterne, un príncipe entre ellos desde hace tiempo. ¿Lo observó anoche? ¿Se dio cuenta de que, en lugar de conversar, en lugar de ayudarme —como estaba obligado doblemente a hacer, debido a la defección de Vernon Whitford: algo que no he comprendido aún—, se sentó aguzando el labio inferior para cortar las observaciones? ¡Con mi preferido! ¡Con el coronel De Craye! Si hubiera atacado al señor Capes, con su gobernador de Bombay, como lo llama ese hombre, o al coronel Wildjoh y su iglesia protestante en peligro, o a sir Wilson Pettifer que insistía en su república monárquica o ¡a cualquier otro! No, prefirió ser sarcástico con el amigo Horacio y sacó lo peor de sí. ¡El sarcasmo es tan bobo! ¿Cuál es la ganancia si ha sido hábil? La gente olvida los epigramas y recuerda el buen talante de los demás. En ese campo, querida, ha de decidirse por ser batida por *el amigo Horacio* . Tengo mis prejuicios y parcialidades, pero me gusta el buen humor y amo

el ingenio y, cuando veo que alguien tiene ambas cosas, me descubro, y lo confieso llanamente, por poco femenino que sea.

—¡En absoluto! —exclamó Clara.

—Estamos de acuerdo, entonces.

Clara puso una boca vacía de palabras: estaban de acuerdo. La señora Mountstuart le apretó la mano.

—¡Cuando intimamos con una refinada pícara! —dijo—. Perdóneme, pues podría jurar que Willoughby me ha traicionado.

La mirada de Clara fue suave, amable, brillante a veces, y se nubló enseguida cuando la dama reanudó la conversación:

—Una amiga de mi propio sexo, y joven, y vecina cercana, es todo cuanto había pedido en mis oraciones. La excusaré, querida, por no estar tan ansiosa de la amistad de una anciana. Pero le seré útil, ya verá. En primer lugar, no solicito secretos. En segundo lugar, los guardo. En tercer lugar, tengo algo de poder y, en cuarto lugar, toda recién casada necesita una amiga como yo. Sí, y lady Patterne a la cabeza del condado será más fuerte con mi respaldo. No parece complacida, querida. Hable.

—¡Querida señora Mountstuart!

—Le diré que le tengo mucho cariño a Willoughby, pero vi las faltas del muchacho y veo las del hombre. Tiene el orgullo de un rey y resulta penoso cuando se ofende. Es pródigo en generosidad, pero no sabe perdonar. En cuanto a sus errores, hemos de ser ciegos a ellos como santos. Su secreto es que se trata de una de esas criaturas excesivamente civilizadas que aspiran a la perfección y creo que habría que apoyarlo en su noción de haberla logrado, pues cuantos más hombres de esa clase haya, mayor será nuestra influencia. Destaca en muchos deportes, porque no quiere ser superado en nada, pero, como los hombres no comprenden su finura, se vuelve a nosotras y su esposa ha de manejarlo con esa clave. Baja usted la mirada ante la idea de manejarlo. Hay que hacerlo. Puede usted estar segura de una cosa: él estará orgulloso de usted. Su esposa no estará muy enamorada de sí misma si no es la mujer más feliz del mundo. Tendrá usted los mejores caballos, los mejores vestidos, las joyas más hermosas de Inglaterra y un cocinero incomparable. La casa cambiará en el momento en que entre usted en ella como lady Patterne y, querida, justo donde él, con todas sus gracias, sea deficiente en atracción, las suyas lo suplirán. La clase de Otelo que haga, o de Leontes, no la conozco ni nadie ha necesitado nunca conocerla entre nosotros. Mi impresión es que, si una sola sombra de sospecha cruza por su mente, es una especie de hombre de doble rasero al culparse mediante la venganza anticipada de una ofensa imaginaria. No es infrecuente en los hombres. He oído historias extrañas de ellos y lo mismo le pasará a usted a su tiempo, pero no me las oirá a mí. Ninguna joven estará más amargada por haber sido mi amiga. Una palabra de consejo ahora que estamos con el tema: no juegue al contragolpe con él. Willoughby se asegurará de haberla dejado fuera de juego y usted se verá obligada a ir más lejos de lo que se proponía. Dicen que batimos a los hombres en la caza, y lo hacemos, a costa de batirnos a nosotras mismas. Una vez hemos empezado, es una carrera que acaba al borde de un precipicio al que cae el ganador. Hemos de ser moderadamente serviles para mantener nuestra posición, que se nos da en apariencia, pero las apariencias constituyen una gran parte de la vida, y con mucho la más cómoda, en la medida en que seamos discretas en el momento oportuno. Willoughby es un hombre cuyo orgullo, ofendido, llevará a su esposa a la perdición para solazarse. Si se casara con una viuda fastidiosa, su panfleto sobre el *suttee* se publicaría enseguida. Vernon Whitford recibiría instrucciones al respecto en la primera luna escarchada. ¿Le gusta la señorita Dale?

—Creo que me gusta más de lo que yo le gusto a ella —dijo Clara.

—¿No han intimado?

—Lo he intentado. Ella no tiene culpa en modo alguno. Me doy cuenta de por qué me ha malinterpretado o tal vez habría de decir condenado justamente.

—El héroe de dos mujeres debe morir y ser llorado en común antes de que ellas puedan apreciarse mutuamente. ¿No tiene frío?

—No.

—Se ha estremecido, querida.

—¿Lo he hecho?

—Yo lo hago a veces. Nuestros pies pisan nuestra tumba, dondequiera que esté. Dé por seguro que Willoughby Patterne es un hombre de honor impecable.

—No lo dudo.

—Su propósito es adorarla a usted. Está acostumbrado a tener mujeres a su alrededor como ofrendas votivas.

—¡Yo...!

—Usted no puede, por supuesto: cualquiera lo ve a primera vista. Usted me resulta mucho más dulce por no ser pacata. El matrimonio cura una multitud de indisposiciones.

—¡Oh! Señora Mountstuart, ¿me escuchará usted?

—Enseguida. No me amenace con confidencias. La elocuencia es terrible en las mujeres. Sospecho, querida, que ambas sabemos más de lo que puede decirse.

—Usted no sospecha la verdad, me temo.

—Déjeme decirle algo de los hombres celosos, cuando no son negros casados con hijas desobedientes. Hablo de nuestra criatura cortés de los salones, y de enamorados, recuerde, no maridos: dos especies distintas, casados o no. Rara vez se entregan a los celos salvo que ellos mismos sean veleidosos. Los celos los fijan. Solo tienen que imaginar que nos estamos divirtiendo y se vuelven tan deferentes como mi criado, tan inofensivos como el cazador cuya arma ha estallado. ¡Ah mi hermosa Middleton! No trato de darle lecciones. Usted le ha dado una y mi mesa sufrió por eso anoche, pero no guardo rencor.

—Usted me desconcierta, señora Mountstuart.

—No si le dijera que usted ha llevado al pobre hombre a probar si le sería posible abandonarla.

—¿Lo he hecho?

—¡Vaya, y con éxito!

—¿He tenido éxito?

—¡Eso es, querida!

—¿Lo hará?

—Cuando los hombres prefieren lo rancio a lo fresco, lo marchito a lo floreciente, la excelencia en abstracto a lo palpable. Con su ociosa charla sobre el intelecto femenino y una ninfa en la gruta y una madre de los Gracos... Bueno, ¡pensará que estoy deslumbrada de admiración por él por hablarme! Escuchamos, ya sabe. Es uno de esos hombres que lanza una especie de hechizo físico sobre nosotras cuando nos tiene al oído hasta que empezamos a pensar en ello hablándole a otro. Supongo que hay gente inteligente que sondea el corazón mientras avanza el diálogo. Nosotras lo leemos. No, querida, usted se las ha ingeniado muy bien para mostrarle que no todo es posible: no puede. La verdadera causa de alarma, en mi humilde opinión, es que usted no haya desbaratado sus planes de una manera trivial, como él diría, engañado, demasiado en serio, que haya ido más lejos de lo que podríamos reprocharle por no ser más sabio, pero los hombres no aprenden sin quejarse que son simples armas que hay que deponer. Déjeme a mí que lo componga. Willoughby no puede abandonarla. Estoy segura de que lo ha intentado; su orgullo ha quedado horriblemente maltrecho. Usted es inteligente y él ha recibido una lección. Si esas susceptibilidades no se producen antes del matrimonio se producen después, así que no se ha perdido el tiempo y es bueno ser capaces de contemplarlas retrospectivamente. Está usted muy pálida, chiquilla.

—¿Puede usted pensar, señora Mountstuart, puede usted pensar que soy tan despiadadamente traidora?

—Sea honesta, hermosa Middleton, y respóndame: ¿puede usted decirme que no tenía la menor intención de producir efecto en Willoughby?

Clara refrenó el instinto de su lengua para defender sus mejillas enrojecidas, con la sensación de que se estaba desintegrando y derrumbando; pero quería que esa dama fuera su amiga y tenía que someterse a las condiciones y ruborizarse y callar.

La señora Mountstuart la examinó a placer.

—Eso está mejor. La conciencia se ruboriza. Lo sabemos por la conflagración exterior. No sea severa consigo misma: se pondría en el otro extremo. Su rubor cuenta para mí en contra de cualquier evidencia, de todos los Crooklyns de este mundo. Usted ha perdido su bolsa.

—He descubierto esta mañana que la había perdido.

—Flitch ha estado aquí con ella. Willoughby la tiene. Usted se la pedirá; él reclamará el cobro; se pondrán rojos los dos y ahí acabará el episodio, sin que nadie haya muerto; solo habrá un pobre hombre herido de melancolía y habré de ofrecerle mi mano para consolarlo, dedicada a probarle que el *suttee* ha sido abolido. Bien, ahora vayamos al asunto. Ya le he dicho que quería sondearla. Hemos exagerado con la porcelana a propósito de usted. La pobre lady Busshe está desesperada por su decepción. Yo querría que mi regalo de bodas fuera de su gusto.

—¡Madam!

—¿A qué madam implora?

—¡A la querida señora Mountstuart!

—¿Bien?

—Perderé su estima. Tal vez me ayude. Nadie más puede. Estoy prisionera: obligada a seguir con esta impostura. ¡Oh! No hablaré demasiado: usted se opone a ello y a mí me disgusta, pero debo esforzarme por explicarle que soy indigna de la posición que usted considera orgullosa.

—Calle, calle; todos somos indignos, nos cruzamos de brazos, agachamos la cabeza y aceptamos los honores. ¿Está usted jugando a la doncella humilde? ¡Qué vieja tonada! ¿Bien? Deme las razones.

—No quiero casarme.

—¡Willoughby es el gran partido del condado!

—No puedo casarme con él.

—Pero ¡si está a la puerta de la iglesia con él! ¿No puede casarse con él?

—Eso no me obliga.

—La puerta de la iglesia es tan vinculante como el altar para una muchacha honorable. ¿Qué se propone? Puesto que he venido a escuchar sus confidencias, las medias tintas no valen. Hemos de tener tanto mujeres honorables como hombres de honor. ¿No se imaginará usted que Willoughby pueda ser rechazado ahora, en este momento? ¿Qué tiene usted contra él? ¡Vamos!

—He descubierto que no...

—¿Qué?

—Que no lo amo.

La señora Mountstuart torció el gesto por un instante.

—Eso no es una respuesta. ¡La causa! —dijo—. ¿Qué ha hecho Willoughby?

—Nada.

—¿Y cuándo ha descubierto usted esa nada?

—Poco a poco, sin darme cuenta, de repente.

—¿De repente y poco a poco? Supongo que es inútil preguntar el motivo. Pero, si todo eso es verdad, no debería estar aquí.

—Quiero irme; no puedo.

—¿Han tenido una escena?

—He expresado mi deseo.

—¿Con rodeos? ¿Como habla una muchacha?

—Con toda claridad. ¡Oh muy claro!

—¿Ha hablado con su padre?

—Lo he hecho.

—¿Y qué dice el doctor Middleton?

—Le resulta increíble.

—¡A mí también! Puedo entender las pequeñas diferencias, los pequeños caprichos, las veleidades; no nos ponemos serios por un golpe en el hombro, como un hombre que se arma caballero, pero romper con un infeliz caballero y rechazarlo a la puerta de la iglesia es una locura o una de esas cosas sin nombre. ¿Cree estar segura de sí misma?

—Estoy tan segura que miro con pesar el momento en que no lo estaba.

—Pero usted estaba enamorada de él.

—Estaba equivocada.

—¿No era amor?

—No tengo amor que dar.

—¡Querida! Sí, sí, pero ese tono de convicción llena de pesar es a menudo un truco, no es nuevo, y sé que asumir el sentido común pasa por una monstruosidad —la señora Mountstuart golpeó su regazo—. ¡Bien! He de estrujarme los sesos: ¿disgusto femenino? ¿Ha oído alguna imputación de su vida pasada, de su carácter moral? ¿No? Las circunstancias pueden haber hecho que se comporte de una manera descortés, sin amabilidad, y no tenemos derecho sobre el pasado de un hombre o es demasiado tarde para afirmarlo. ¿Cuál es el caso?

—Estamos completamente separados.

—¿Nada de...? ¿Nada de celos?

—¡Nada de eso!

—Entonces diga de qué se trata.

—No estamos de acuerdo.

—Muchos buenos acuerdos se basan en desacuerdos. Es lamentable que no tenga usted dote. Si la tuviera, el desacuerdo tendría poca importancia. Está usted tan vinculada por el honor como si tuviera el anillo en el dedo.

—¡Por el honor! Pero apelo al suyo, no soy esposa para él.

—Pero, si él insistiera, ¿consentiría usted?

—Apelo a la razón. Es, madam...

—Pero, digo, si él insistiera, ¡usted consentiría!

—Insistiría en su miseria y en la mía.

La señora Mountstuart se meció.

—¡Mi pobre sir Willoughby! ¡Qué destino! ¡Y yo que la tomé por una muchacha inteligente! ¡Vaya, admiraba cómo lo había manejado usted! Y ahora me veo obligada a recibir una lección de lady Busshe. Mi

querida Middleton, ¡que no se diga que lady Busshe ha visto más en profundidad que yo! Hay algo de vanidad, lo confieso: no quiero ocultarlo. Lady Busshe declaró que, cuando envió su regalo —no la creo—, tuvo la premonición de que se lo devolvería. Seguramente no querrá usted justificar las extravagancias de una mujer sin la reverencia corriente. Anatomicémoslo como queramos, es un hombre espléndido (y yo se lo encarecí a usted) No es frecuente contemplar a un hombre de aspecto tan señorial, tan afable cuando se siente a gusto, ¡la imagen de un caballero inglés! ¡El tipo de hombre que querríamos casado con nuestra vecindad! ¡Una mujer que puede hablar abiertamente de esperar que lo dejen plantado dos veces! La hace encogerse a una. Es repulsivo. Sería incomprensible salvo, por supuesto, para lady Busshe, que se precipitó en una de sus violentas conclusiones y se ha convertido en profetisa. ¿Puede usted concebir a una mujer que imagine que puede pasarle dos veces al mismo hombre? No estoy segura de que no enviara el mismo regalo que llegó y volvió ya una vez: ya sabe, el compromiso Durham. Me dijo anoche que se lo había devuelto. La vigilé mientras escuchaba llena de sospechas al profesor Crooklyn. Querida, es su pasión por predecir desastres, ¡su pasión! Cuando se confirman, triunfa, por supuesto. Nos dominará a todos con cabeceos de sabiduría cada vez que ocurra una nimiedad. El condado se volverá insoportable. ¡Que no se diga, Middleton! No responda como un oráculo porque yo no deje de hablar. Sea franca conmigo. Pronto se detendrá y encontrará la falta de razón en la falta de palabras. Le aseguro que eso es cierto. Déjeme mirarla bien. No —dijo la señora Mountstuart, una vez que se hubo colocado adecuadamente para captar los rasgos de Clara—, tiene usted seso: puede verse por la nariz y la boca. Juraría que es usted la mujer que pensaba. Su ingenio es sigiloso. ¿Corazón?

—No —suspiró Clara.

El suspiro fue, en parte, voluntario, aunque no forzado, como podemos con toda sinceridad interpretar a un personaje que es el nuestro por simpatía.

La señora Mountstuart sintió el peso adicional en la exhalación de la joven dama. No había necesidad de un profundo suspiro en ausencia de corazón o ante la confesión de esa ausencia. Si Clara no amaba al hombre con el que estaba comprometida, suspirar al respecto significaba... ¿Qué? Una excusa, y una excusa es la tapadera de un secreto. Las muchachas no suspiran de ese modo para compadecerse del hombre para el que no tienen corazón, salvo que al mismo tiempo las oprima el conocimiento o el temor de tener un corazón para alguien más. Como regla, no tienen compasión para él; podríamos esperar de una manera tan razonable que un soldado lamentara la baja en acción de un enemigo: habría de carecer de todo compromiso para ello. Suponiendo una sombra de lo que tenía que exhibirse, cuando no se ha lamentado, hay un trasfondo de reserva: se están compadeciendo a sí mismas bajo la máscara de una piedad decente por el desgraciado.

Esos eran los cálculos de la señora Mountstuart, que eran, como sus sospechas, rudos y amplios, no del todo incorrectos, pero inconmensurables con la verdad. El propósito rara vez golpea la cabeza de alfiler de la verdad. Su indagación por medio de una penetración profesional en la oscuridad de un pecho puede sacarlo a la luz llamando con fuerza a las puertas de la vecindad que llamamos conjetura, pero no saldrá limpio; otras materias se adherirán a él y serán menos que la verdad. Lo incontaminado solo se logra por fe o esperándolo.

¡Una enamorada!, pensó la sagaz dama. No había enamorada: había algo de amor o más bien una preparación de la cámara nupcial sin que se hubiera encendido la lámpara.

—¿De verdad no tiene usted corazón para la posición de primera dama del condado? —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

La respuesta de Clara fue firme.

—No.

—Querida, la creeré con una condición. Míreme. Tiene ojos. Si es una travesura, está preparada. Pero ¡es mucho mejor, cuando se gana un premio, zanjar la cuestión y lucirlo! Lady Patterne podrá entregarse a sus veleidades y caprichos al dirigir el condado. El hombre, seguramente el hombre... Se comportó torpemente anoche, pero una belleza como esta... —dijo, poniendo un dedo en la mejilla de Clara y mimándola un instante—. Su belleza turbaría el temple de un ogro. El hombre es tan manejable como presentable. Usted tiene la belleza que los franceses llaman... No, es la belleza de una reina de los elfos: podemos verlos acechando a su alrededor, uno aquí, otro allá. Sonríen, bailan; están tristes, se cuelgan a sí mismos. No, no hay una sola traza satánica; aún no, al menos. Vamos, vamos, Middleton, es un hombre del que estar orgullosa. Podría enviarlo al parlamento para que desaparecieran sus humores. En mi opinión, tiene un hermoso estilo: ¿consciente? No lo había pensado hasta anoche. No puedo adivinar lo que le ha pasado recientemente. Una vez fue un gran monarca. De joven fue realmente un soberbio caballero inglés. ¿Le ha hecho usted daño?

—Mi desgracia es la de estar obligada a hacerle daño —dijo Clara.

—No es necesario, hija mía, que lo haga para casarse.

Clara respiró hondo, alzó los hombros y los estrechó y echó hacia atrás la cabeza.

La señora Mountstuart exclamó:

—Pero ¡el escándalo! ¿No pensará en seguir el ejemplo de aquella muchacha, Durham? La provocaran o no los celos. Parece que con usted las cosas han ido tan sorprendentemente lejos en tan poco tiempo que resulta alarmante pensar dónde se detendrá. Su aspecto justo ahora era el de una completa revulsión.

—Temo que lo sea. No puedo dominarme. Querida madam, tenga usted la seguridad de que no me comportaré escandalosamente ni con deshonor. Lo que le pido es que me ayude. Sé esto de mí misma: no soy la mejor de las mujeres. Soy retorcidamente impaciente. No sería una buena esposa. Sentimientos como los míos me enseñan cosas infelices de mí misma.

—Rico, encantador, señorial, influyente, de brillante salud, de hermosas haciendas.

La señora Mountstuart enumeró con acentos petulantes los atributos de sir Willoughby que cruzaron por su mente y resultaban atractivos al alma de la mujer.

—Supongo que deseará que la tome en serio.

—Apelo a su ayuda.

—¿Qué ayuda?

—Persuádalo de la locura de presionarme para que mantenga mi palabra.

—La creeré, mi querida Middleton, con una condición: lo que dice de no tener corazón es absurdo. Un cambio como este, si hemos de creer que es un cambio, ocurre en el corazón, no porque no se tenga. ¿No lo ve? Pero si me quiere por amiga, no debe fingir estupidez. Ya es bastante malo por sí mismo: la imitación es horrenda. Ha de ser honesta conmigo y decirme la verdad. La intención de su visita era la de casarse con Willoughby Patterne.

—Sí.

—Y *gradualmente* descubrió usted *de repente,* una vez aquí, que usted no quería si podía encontrar un medio de evitarlo.

—¡Oh madam! Sí, es cierto.

—Ahora viene la prueba. Mi encantadora Middleton, sus mejillas encendidas no serán suficientes esta vez. La vieja serpiente puede ruborizarse como una doncella inocente para la ocasión. Ha de hablar y decirme en seis palabras cómo ocurrió, y no pierda una con madam ni con *¡Oh señora Mountstuart!* ¿Por qué cambió?

—Vine... Cuando vine tenía algunas dudas. Digo la verdad. Me di cuenta de que no podía rendirle la admiración que tiene, me atrevería a decir, el derecho a esperar. Cambié; me sorprendió, me sorprende ahora. Pero ¡de una manera tan competa! Así que pensar en casarme con él es...

—Difiera el símil —interpuso la señora Mountstuart—. Aunque dé con uno ingenioso no le sacará lo mejor. Al exceder la limitación de palabras que le había puesto me muestra usted que no es honesta.

—Podría hacer un voto.

—Perjuraría.

—¿Me ayudará?

—Si fuera perfectamente ingenua podría intentarlo.

—Querida señora, ¿qué más puedo decir?

—Tal vez sea difícil. Puede replicar a un catecismo.

—¿Obtendré su ayuda?

—Bien, sí, aunque no me gustan las estipulaciones entre amigas. ¿No hay un hombre vivo a quien quisiera concederle usted su mano? Esa es mi pregunta. No puedo dar un paso hasta saberlo. Responda brevemente: lo hay o no lo hay.

Clara se reclinó sin aliento, saltando mentalmente al abismo, dándose cuenta, con la fría prudencia de la abstención y el delirio de la confusión. ¿Existía ese hombre? Se parecía a la libertad pensar que existía; declararlo prometía libertad.

—¡Oh señora Mountstuart!

—¿Bien?

—¿Me ayudará?

—¡Caramba! Empezaré a dudar de su deseo de que lo haga.

—¿Conceder *voluntariamente* mi mano, madam?

—¡Qué lástima! Con un ingenio como el suyo, ¿no se da cuenta de dónde la deja una vacilación al responder?

—Mi querida señora, ¿me dará su mano? ¿Puedo hablar en voz baja?

—No necesita susurrar; no miraré.

La voz de Clara tembló en un acorde tenso.

—Hay alguien... comparado con el cual siento mi insignificancia. Si pudiera ayudarlo.

—¿Qué necesidad tiene de decirme más que que hay alguien?

—Ah, madam, es distinto: no es lo que usted imagina. Me ha pedido que sea escrupulosamente sincera. Lo soy. Quiero que sepa que es una clase de sentimiento distinta de lo que podría esperarse de una... confesión. Conceder mi mano está más allá de cualquier pensamiento que haya alentado. Si usted me hubiera preguntado si hay alguien a quien admire, sí, lo hay. No puedo evitar admirar una naturaleza hermosa y valientemente abnegada. Es alguien a quien debe usted compadecer y compadecer la pone a usted por debajo de él, pues se compadecería de él porque su nobleza resulta enemiga de su fortuna. Vive para los demás.

Su voz era musicalmente conmovedora en ese tono bajo salido del corazón, del que era imposible burlarse o dudar.

La señora Mountstuart asentía.

—¿Es inteligente?

—Mucho.

—¿Habla bien?

—Sí.

—¿Encantador?

—Podría considerarse así.

—¿Ingenioso?

—Creo que lo es.

—¿Alegre, jovial?

—A su manera.

—Vaya, sería un charlatán si adoptara otra. ¿Pobre?

—No es rico.

La señora Mountstuart guardó un prolongado silencio, pero pellizcó los dedos de Clara una o dos veces para darle confianza sin aprobarla.

—Por supuesto es pobre —dijo al final—. Debe ser justo lo contrario de lo que usted *podría* tener. Bien, mi hermosa Middleton. No puedo decir que haya sido deshonesta. La ayudaré hasta donde sea capaz. Es imposible decir cómo. Estamos en un lodazal. Me parece que lo mejor sería que ese ángel digno de compasión dé algunos saltos y le presente a usted otra perspectiva de sí mismo. No creo en su inocencia. Sabía que usted es una mujer comprometida.

—No ha insinuado una sola palabra o señal de deslealtad.

—Entonces ¿cómo sabe usted...?

—No lo sé.

—¿No es él la causa de su deseo de romper su compromiso?

—No.

—Entonces ha tenido usted éxito en no contarme nada. ¿Qué es?

—¡Ah madam!

—¿Romperá usted su compromiso solo porque esa criatura admirable existe?

Clara sacudió la cabeza; no podría decirlo: estaba aturdida. Había dicho en voz alta lo que no se había dicho a sí misma y, al hacerlo, había dado un paso más allá de la línea que se atrevía a contemplar.

—No la retendré más tiempo —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. Cuanto más aprendemos, más nos damos cuenta de que no somos tan sabias como pensábamos. ¡Tendré que ir a la escuela de lady Busshe! Realmente la considero a usted una muchacha muy inteligente. Si usted vuelve a cambiar, confío en que me notifique esa importante circunstancia.

—Lo haré —dijo Clara, y ninguna declaración violenta de la imposibilidad de cambiar habría tenido más efecto sobre su oyente.

La señora Mountstuart volvió a examinar su rostro para cotejarlo con sus primeras impresiones.

—¿Puedo obrar libremente con el conocimiento que he adquirido?

—Estoy completamente en sus manos, madam.

—No he querido resultar desagradable.

—No lo ha sido. Podría abrazarla.

—Estoy más bien destrozada y besarnos no me recompondrá. ¡Me reía de lady Busshe! No me extraña que saliera usted como una oruga en un ramo de flores decepcionante cuando le dije que había tenido éxito con el pobre sir Willoughby y que él no podía abandonarla. Me di cuenta. Una mujer como lady Busshe, fisgoneando siempre en las cosas lamentables, no habría necesitado más ilustración. ¿Tiene genio?

Clara no le pidió que señalara la persona impuesta de una manera tan abrupta.

—Tiene faltas —dijo.

—¡Es el fin para sir Willoughby, entonces! Sin embargo no digo que la abandone cuando se entere de lo peor, si ha de enterarse, como debería por su bien. Tampoco digo que deba abandonarla. Será él el ángel digno de compasión si lo hace. Usted... Pero usted no merece halagos; serían inmorales. Usted se ha portado

mal, mal, mal. No había tenido en toda mi vida un revés semejante. Merece usted el estigma; será usted célebre: la llamarán la Número Dos. ¡Piense en eso! ¡Ni siquiera original! Interrumpamos la conferencia o diré patochadas hasta la extinción. Creo que he oído la campana de la comida.

—Ha sonado.

—No parece dispuesta a la compañía, pero sería mejor que viniera.

—¡Oh sí: todos los días son iguales!

—Ya esté usted en mis manos o yo en las suyas, somos una pareja de archiconspiradoras contra la paz de la familia a cuya mesa nos sentamos y, cuanto más tamborileemos, más viles seremos, pero hemos de hacerlo para calmarnos.

La señora Mountstuart alisó las faldas de su voluminoso vestido y señaló:

—A cierta edad nuestros maestros son los jóvenes: aprendemos mirando atrás. Habla muy bien de mí que no la haya llamado loca. Llena de faltas, con aspecto de buena chica, conversadora agradable, jovial, pobre... ¡Y prefiere eso a esto! —exclamó la gran dama en su ensueño mientras salía del círculo de arbustos a una vista de la casa solariega.

El coronel De Craye avanzó hacia ella, con buen aspecto, jovial, en modo alguno un mal conversador, nada de un Creso y abigarrado de faltas.

Su amplia sonrisa ofendió la irresuelta hostilidad del semblante de la señora Mountstuart, confiada como el destello de la luz del sol en la brisa. El efecto la encolerizó a causa de la prometida de sir Willoughby.

—Buenos días, señora Mountstuart. Creo que soy el último en saludarla.

—¿Cuánto tiempo se quedará, coronel De Craye?

—Besé la tierra cuando llegué, como Guillermo el Normando, y por tanto le tengo afecto al terreno, madam.

—Supongo que no tomará posesión de él.

—¡Un puñado me bastaría!

—Juega usted al conquistador muy bien, he oído. Pero la propiedad es más sagrada que en la época de Guillermo el Normando.

—Hablando de propiedad, señorita Middleton, ha aparecido su bolsa —dijo.

—Lo sé —respondió de una manera tan desapasionada como la señora Mountstuart habría deseado, aunque el aire ingenuo de la muchacha la enfureció un poco.

Clara siguió adelante.

—Devuelve usted bolsas —observó la señora Mountstuart.

Su insistencia en la palabra, y su aspecto, inquietaron a De Craye, pues la joven y la gran dama habían tenido una larga conversación.

—Una cosa que había caído y no fue robada —dijo él.

—No tan dulce como para quedársela, entonces.

—Creo que habría podido sentir lo mismo que el pobre Flitch, el cochero, que la encontró.

—Si es usted consciente de esas tentaciones de apropiarse de lo que no es suyo, debería usted dejar la vecindad.

—¿Y hacerlo en otra parte? Ese no es un consejo virtuoso.

—No estoy dándole consejos en interés de su virtud, coronel De Craye.

—Por un momento me he atrevido a pensar que lo hacía, madam —dijo, inclinándose con arrepentimiento.

Estaban cerca del ventanal del comedor y la señora Mountstuart prefirió acabar un diálogo que no prometía dejar en sus rasgos el aspecto de férrea austeridad que tenía al principio. Estaba bajo el hechizo de la gratitud de su conducta de la noche anterior en su mesa. No podía ser demasiado severa.

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50 *Suttee* o satí, del sánscrito, es el rito de inmolación de una viuda en la pira de su marido. La India colonial estaba dividida en presidencias.

XXXVI

Una animada conversación durante el almuerzo

VERNON cruzaba el vestíbulo hacia el comedor cuando la señora Mountstuart entró. Lo llamó.

—¿Se han reconciliado los campeones?

Vernon respondió:

—No del todo, pero han consentido en encontrarse ante el altar para ofrecer una víctima a los dioses en forma de modernas imitaciones poéticas de los clásicos.

—Eso parece bastante inocente. ¿No se ha mostrado preocupado el profesor por su pecho?

—Recuerda una y otra vez su resfriado.

—Ha de ayudarlo usted a olvidarlo.

—Lady Busshe y lady Culmer están aquí —dijo Vernon, sin suponer que fuera un anuncio serio hasta que el efecto que surtió en la señora Mountstuart lo corrigió.

La dama bajó la voz.

—Llévese a mi hermosa amiga a uno de sus paseos cuando nos levantemos de la mesa. Tendrá que rescatarla, pero haga lo que le digo.

—Es una caminante estupenda —observó Vernon con un estilo simplón.

—No es necesario que sea una de sus hazañas pedestres —dijo la señora Mountstuart, y lo dejó ir, volviéndose al coronel De Craye para pronunciar un encomio sobre él:

—¡El hombre de mente más abierta que conozco! Garantizado para un servicio perpetuo sin perjuicio. ¡Si usted fuera todo... en lugar de aceptar todos los premios que codicia! Sí, tendrá usted su recompensa por su falta de egoísmo, se lo aseguro. Sí ¡y donde la busque! Eso es lo que ningún hombre cree.

—¡Cuando me vea vestido con su librea! —exclamó el coronel.

—¿Sí? —dijo ella, entreteniéndose con un propósito medio formado de ser confidencial—. ¿Cómo es que siempre estamos tentados de dirigirnos a usted en *innuendo?* No logro adivinarlo.

—Como un perro no entiende el buen inglés, naturalmente le hablamos mal.

La gran dama estaba de buen humor. ¿Quién podía evitar la diversión de ese hombre? Al fin y al cabo, aunque su hermosa Middleton prefiriera ser una loca, no podía negarse que lamentaba lo que los amigos del pobre sir Willoughby sentían por él.

Trató de no sonreír.

—Es usted demasiado absurdo. O un niño, podría haber añadido.

—No me he atrevido.

—Le diré, coronel De Craye, que acabaré por enamorarme de usted sin estimarlo, me temo.

—Lo último se sigue de una manera tan segura como el sabor de un trago de Baco si apura el vaso, madam.

—Nosotras, las mujeres, señor, pensamos que debe ser lo primero.

—Eso es transponer las estaciones y darle a octubre la floración y a abril la manzana, ¡sin dulzura! La estima es algo delicado que aparece tras la floración y el fuego, como una tarde en casa, porque si se diera antes no tendría padre y no podría esperar progenie; no habría naturaleza en el asunto. Así que se lo ruego, madam, ¡aténgase al orden original y usted será la hija de la naturaleza y yo el más feliz de la humanidad!

—Realmente, si yo fuera quince años más joven... No estoy tan segura... Podría intentarlo y volverlo a usted inofensivo.

—¡Muestre los dientes del cordero mientras lo domestica!

—Lo desafío, coronel, y no me quejaré del campo que escoja. Pero ahora deje su ingenio junto a su candor y descienda un minuto conmigo a un nivel cotidiano.

—¿En *innuendo?*

—No, aunque me atrevo a decir que le sería más fácil responder si lo fuera.

—Soy el más franco de los hombres a una palabra de mando.

—Es un susurro. Ha de estar tan alerta como estuvo anoche. Revuelva la mesa. Un poco de viveza bastará. No me imagino malicia, pero hay curiosidad, lo que a menudo es igual de malo y no suele fallar. Tenemos a lady Busshe y a lady Culmer aquí.

—¡Para limpiar de telarañas el cielo!

—Bien, ¿podrá entonces defenderse con escobas?

—Combatí con ellas en mi época.

—Son terriblemente directas.

—Acuden, como Napoléon ordenaba a su caballería.

—Ha de ayudarme a resguardarnos.

—Hará falta variedad en la conversación.

—Constante. Usted es un ángel de inteligencia y, si lo he juzgado bien, temo que lo dejen pasar, a pesar del escándalo. Abra la puerta; no me destocaré.

De Craye abrió la puerta.

Lady Busshe decía en ese momento:

—¿Vamos a tenerlo por vecino, doctor Middleton?

Los recién llegados ahogaron la respuesta del reverendo doctor.

—Pensaba que nos había olvidado —le señaló sir Willoughby a la señora Mountstuart.

—¿Para escaparme con el coronel De Craye? Soy demasiado pesada, mi querido amigo. Además, no he visto aún los regalos de boda.

—El objeto mismo de nuestra visita —exclamó lady Culmer.

—He de confesar que estoy apurada por el mío.

Lady Busshe inclinó la cabeza en dirección a Clara.

—¡Oh puede sacudir la cabeza, pero preferiría oír la pura verdad antes que una evasiva halagüeña!

—¿Cómo definiría usted una pura verdad, doctor Middleton? —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

Como el guerrero adiestrado que está preparado a todas horas para la llamada a las armas, el doctor Middleton se despertó de golpe para su alocución judicial.

—Madam, definiría la pura verdad como la descripción de la verdad que no se imparte a la humanidad sin una poderosa impregnación de la rudeza de quien la dice.

—Es la pura verdad, madam, que el mundo está compuesto de locos y que los bribones son la excepción.

El profesor Crooklyn proporcionó el ejemplo que el reverendo doctor había evitado.

—Para no caer en las garras de la primera definición, que me parece tan feliz como la ballena de Jonás, que podría llevar en su interior al hombre más instruido de su época sin necesidad de digerirlo», dijo De Craye, «una verdad pura es una acusación más bien fuerte de naturaleza universal para rescindir un mínimo de hechos personales.

—La pura verdad es que Platón es un Moisés aticista —le dijo Vernon al doctor Middleton, para mantener la diversión.

—Y que Aristóteles tenía el globo bajo su cráneo —se unió el reverendo doctor.

—Y que los modernos viven de los antiguos.

—Y que ni siquiera uno entre diez mil puede referir el tesoro particular que ha robado.

—El arte de nuestros días es una fiesta de pura verdad —observó el profesor Crooklyn.

—Y que la literatura ha pulido laboriosamente el adjetivo, dondequiera que se encuentre en relación con el nombre —añadió el doctor Middleton.

—La primera aparición de Orson en la corte fue con la figura de una pura verdad, lo que causó que las damas de honor, acostumbradas a los tapices, se asombraran horrorizadas —dijo De Craye [51] .

Para no quedar fuera del brillante juego, sir Willoughby elevó su lanza, sonriéndole a Leticia:

—En suma, la caricatura es la pura verdad.

Leticia dijo:

—Uno de sus extremos; la sinceridad realista es el otro.

Willoughby asintió.

—Se lleva la palma.

La señora Mountstuart se admiraba conforme cada uno intervenía a su manera característica, con una excepción inconsciente de la ayuda que le estaban prestando a una dama afligida desgraciadamente incapaz de una hipocresía decente. Su intrépida indicación al coronel mantenía al enemigo a raya.

Sin embargo, el «En suma» de sir Willoughby no le había complacido y aún menos el lánguido inclinarse y sonreír a la manera de Lotario a la señorita Dale, y él se había dado cuenta y le había herido. Llevando su tremendo peso, ¿cómo iba a competir con esos hombres sin impedimentos en el juego del absurdo que a ella tanto le gustaba incitar en la mesa? Willoughby se turbó aún más al oír a la señorita Eleanor y a la señorita Isabel que estaban de acuerdo en que «caricatura» era la última palabra de la definición. Los parientes deberían hacer algo más que darnos esas recompensas en público.

—¡Bien! —exclamó lady Busshe, expresando su estupefacción por la extraña polvareda que había levantado.

—¿Están a la vista, señorita Middleton? —preguntó lady Culmer.

—Hay todo un regimiento a la vista y listo para la inspección —le respondió el coronel De Craye, pero eso no la arredró—. Los admiradores de la señorita Middleton están siempre a la vista —dijo De Craye.

—¿Pueden verse? —dijo lady Busshe.

Clara hizo de su rostro una pregunta, con una laudable suavidad.

—Los regalos de boda —explicó lady Culmer.

—No.

—De otro modo, querida, corremos el peligro de duplicarlos y triplicarlos y cuadruplicarlos sin satisfacer del todo a la novia.

—Pero hay un peligro mayor en estar *a la vista,* señora —dijo De Craye—, y es la atracción magnética que la exhibición de los regalos de boda tienen para el inefable ladrón, que debe de tener un alma nupcial, pues dondequiera que hay una colección a la vista, no se encuentra lejos. Se dice que conoce el neceser presentado a una dama para la ocasión con quince años de adelanto.

—¿Tantos? —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

—Según el cálculo de la policía. Si los regalos están a la vista, los perros son inútiles, y los cerrojos, y las rejas. Es peor que Cupido. La única protección, por singular que parezca, es un par de botellas del ron de Jamaica más añejo en las Islas Británicas.

—¿Ron? —exclamó lady Busshe.

—El licor de la Marina Real, señora. Con su permiso, les contaré el cuento como prueba. Un amigo mío estaba prometido con una joven dama, sobrina de un viejo capitán de la vieja escuela, la escuela de Benbow, la escuela de la pata de palo y la coleta embreada; un perfecto caballero de lengua avinagrada y una pizca de salmuera en cada cosa que hacía [52] . Parecía sacado a la orilla por la última ola, radiante: el propio Neptuno en humor. Cuando se abrió su regalo para la novia, había allí un par de botellas del ron de Jamaica más añejo de las Islas Británicas, nacido antes que él e incluso que su padre. Es un fabuloso licor en el que le pido que crea, señora; el único mérito de la historia es su portentosa veracidad. Las botellas estaban atadas para que parecieran gemelas, pues las dos tenían la misma aspiración a ser la más vieja. Llevaban una etiqueta que indicaba su edad y preservaba su identidad. Era realmente un par de botellas patriarcales que rivalizaban con muchas de las mayores mansiones del reino en antigüedad. Habrían hecho que el asno que se quedó perplejo ante dos sacos de heno las mirase oblicuamente, suponiendo que tuviera, como animal, gusto por el ron y una propensión a la hilaridad. ¡Maravillosas botellas! En la etiqueta, justo encima de la fecha, estaba escrito: REGALO DE BODA DEL TÍO BENJAMIN A SU SOBRINA BESSY . La pobre Bessy derramó lágrimas de decepción e indignación que habrían bastado para que el viejo caballero flotase en su elemento natal y navegase y todo. Juró que el viejo cascarrabias había querido ofenderla porque su tío odiaba los regalos de boda y había refunfuñado ante la exhibición de copas y platos y de este y aquel hermoso servicio y de *épergnes* y escribanías, espejos, cuchillos y tenedores, neceseres y toda la imponente categoría. La joven protestó, puso el grito en el cielo y declaró que aquellas dos feas botellas no debían unirse a la exhibición en el comedor, donde estuvo durante cuatro días, mientras la familia comía donde podía, en las paredes, como moscas. Pero también estaba el legado del tío Benjamin a la vista, a distancia, de manera que las botellas tuvieron su sitio a pesar de la novia. Una hermosa mañana la familia bajó tras una terrible bulla de los criados: gritos, llamadas a la policía y asesinato. ¿Qué vieron? Vieron a dos prodigiosos ladrones tendidos a lo largo en el suelo, cada uno de ellos con una de las botellas gemelas en la mano y un resto del horror de la medianoche colgando de ellos como una neblina deshilachada, suficiente para temerlos mientras los pateaban, completamente intoxicados. El desorden de los regalos de boda era salvaje, pero no faltaba ninguno, lo que se debía, hemos de confesarlo, a las dos botellas del tío Benjy de añejo ron de Jamaica.

El coronel De Craye concluyó con una afirmación de la verdad de la historia.

—Un viejo lobo de mar de lo más previsor —exclamó la señora Mountstuart, riendo ante lady Busshe y lady Culmer.

Las dos damas repicaron cautelosamente.

—¿Tiene usted más historias ingeniosas, coronel De Craye? —dijo lady Busshe.

—¡Ah señora, cuando el árbol empieza a ponerse dorado se acerca a la bancarrota!

—¡Poético! —señaló lady Culmer, mirando de soslayo el semblante estremecido de la señorita Middleton y advirtiendo que ella y sir Willoughby no habían intercambiado palabras ni miradas.

—Pero, en el caso de que su oporto Patterne superase el catálogo de regalos nupciales, Willoughby, le recomendaría que apostara un policía para tenerlo vigilado —dijo el doctor Middleton mientras llenaba su vaso, tomando Burdeos a mediodía, bajo la conciencia de la virtud y su recompensa al llegar a las siete y media de la tarde.

—Haría falta una docena de perros, señor —dijo De Craye.

—Entonces no hay que pensar en ello. ¡Una, de hecho!

El doctor Middleton rechazó la idea.

—Estamos donde empezamos —observó lady Busshe.

—Si hemos de avanzar por etapas —asintió la señora Mountstuart.

—Nos considerarán viejas carrozas —observó el coronel.

—Usted —dijo lady Culmer— nos lleva ventaja por su estrecha amistad con la señorita Middleton. Conoce sus gustos y hasta qué punto la han consultado en los pequeños presentes que ya se han reunido en alguna parte, aunque no para la inspección. Yo estoy en el mar y lady Busshe mortalmente alarmada. Hay mucho tiempo para hacer un cambio, aunque nos acercamos rápidamente al día fatídico, señorita Middleton. Estamos muy, muy cerca. ¡Oh sí! Soy de quienes piensan que estos asuntos han de ser tratados con franqueza, sin esa ridícula afectación burguesa, de manera que estemos seguras de dar una satisfacción. Es una transacción, como todo en la vida. Por mi parte deseo que me recuerden favorablemente. Creo que es una prueba de buena educación hablar de estas cosas de una manera sencilla. Usted se casa; yo deseo que usted tenga algo consigo que le haga recordarme. ¿Qué será? Útil u ornamental. Para una casa normal no es difícil. Pero donde abunda la riqueza nos encontramos ante un dilema.

—Y con personas de gustos decididos —añadió lady Busshe—. Realmente soy muy desgraciada —se quejó a Clara.

Sir Willoughby soltó a Leticia; el aspecto que Clara ofrecía de una decisión firme de guardar silencio sobre el asunto de los regalos nupciales hacía imperativa una diversión.

—Escogió usted su porcelana de una manera exquisita y le aseguró que soy un *connoiseur* —dijo—. Conozco peor la porcelana de Sajonia, ya lo sabe; puedo emular al condado en la de Sèvres y no es fácil emular mi herencia de porcelana china en el país.

—Puedes considerar tus jarrones de dragones un regalo del joven Crossjay —dijo De Craye.

—¿Cómo?

—¿No se abstuvo de romperlos? ¡Es un muchacho estupendo! La porcelana y un muchacho juntos en una casa son un caso de desastre a la vista equivalente al de Flitch y el calesín.

—Entenderá usted que mi amigo Horacio, cuyo ingenio se basa en este ejemplo en otro cuento de un muchacho, nos trajo una magnífica pieza de porcelana, destruida al volcar en el traslado desde la estación —le dijo Willoughby a lady Busshe.

Ella y lady Culmer emitieron penosos *Oh,* mientras la señorita Eleanor y la señorita Isabel contaban a grandes rasgos el incidente. Luego las visitas pusieron sus ojos con unánime simpatía sobre Clara. Al recobrarse de lo cual, tras una contemplación de mármol, lady Busshe enfatizó:

—No, usted no ama la porcelana, es evidente, señorita Middleton.

—Me alegra estar segura de ello —dijo lady Culmer.

—¡Oh! Conozco ese rostro, conozco esa mirada.

Lady Busshe advirtió de una manera afectada para levantar los ánimos:

—No es la primera vez que lo veo.

Sir Willoughby se estremeció hasta el tuétano.

—Disiparemos esas fantasías de una generosidad tan escrupulosa, mi querida lady Busshe.

La insólita infracción de la delicadeza de la dama al hablar públicamente de su regalo y la vulgar persistencia en el asunto lo habían dejado considerablemente perplejo y, si no la había entendido mal, acababa de aludir a la demoníaca Constanza Durham. Tal vez la hubiera entendido mal; estaba en guardia contra su terrible susceptibilidad. Sin embargo, era difícil explicarse esa conducta de una dama que era una de sus grandes amigas y admiradoras, una dama de alcurnia. ¡También lady Culmer! Otra dama de alcurnia. ¿Era una colusión? ¿Sospechaban algo? Se volvió al rostro de Leticia en busca de un antídoto a su pena.

—Oh pero ustedes no son uno aún y necesitaré dos voces para convencerme —añadió lady Busshe tras otra mirada al mármol.

—Lady Busshe, le ruego que no me considere desagradecida —dijo Clara.

—¡Superchería! ¡Gratitud! Se trata de complacer su gusto, de satisfacerla. La gratitud me importa tan poco como la adulación.

—Pero la gratitud es adulación —dijo Vernon.

—Nada de metafísica, señor Whitford.

—Pero repare un poco en la adulación, señora —dijo De Craye—. Es la más hermosa de las artes: podríamos considerarla la escultura moral. Los expertos en ella pueden darles a sus amigos la forma que prefieran si practican con la habilidad requerida. Yo mismo, pobre menestral como soy, he logrado que un hombre actúe como Salomón alabando constantemente su sabiduría. Adoptó un giro magnífico en un momento temprano de la dosis. Sopesaba la menor de las cuestiones de su vida cotidiana con una deliberación casi oriental. Si lo hubiera empujado, habría contratado a un recién nacido y a dos madres para que riñeran por el pedazo indiviso.

—Tengo la esperanza de pasar un día en Londres con usted —le dijo lady Culmer a Clara.

—¿No se olvida usted de la reina de Saba? —le dijo la señora Mountstuart a De Craye.

—Con su aparición el juego habría quedado en sus manos por completo —dijo el coronel.

—Eso —prosiguió lady Culmer— si no desprecia usted a una anciana como camarada en una excursión de compras.

—¡Despreciar a quien esquilamos! —exclamó el doctor Middleton—. Oh no, lady Culmer. La oveja es sagrada.

—No estoy seguro —dijo Vernon.

—¿En qué, y hasta dónde, no está usted seguro? —dijo el doctor Middleton.

—La tendencia natural es la de despreciar lo esquilado.

—Mantengo lo contrario. Es una lástima, si usted quiere; especialmente cuando balan.

—Hay que asumir que quienes hacen regalos son gente esquilada: objeto —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

—Madam, se espera que demos; nos incitan a dar; lo ha llamado usted la moda de dar y la persona que rehúsa dar, o es incapaz de dar, puede dar por hecho que será considerada de una manera tan benévola como considera a una oveja de lana marchita y fláccida el granjero, a quien la pobre apariencia de la bestia le recuerda a un perro extraño que haya acosado al rebaño. Ni siquiera el capitán Benjamin, como ustedes han visto, fue capaz de resistir esa petición. La pareja del himeneo tiene licencia de corso para chantajearnos, supervivientes de un periodo sin civilizar. Pero, al tomar sin piedad, me aventuro a confiar en que los modales de una época más feliz la instruyan para que no nos desprecien. Supongo que el señor Whitford tiene en mente un orden inferior de ladrones.

—Permítame decir, señor, que no ha tenido usted en cuenta el innoble aspecto de lo trasquilado —dijo Vernon—. Apelo a las damas: si contemplaran un avestruz desplumado dando vueltas por el Salón de la Reina, ¿no lo despreciarían aunque ellas llevaran sus plumas?

—Una suposición extremada —dijo el doctor Middleton, frunciendo el ceño—. Apenas legítima para sugerirla.

—Creo que es válida como ejemplo.

—¿Se ha dado esa circunstancia, pregunto?

—¿En la vida? Mil veces.

—Eso temo —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

Lady Busshe mostró síntomas de desear abandonar una mesa infructuosa.

Vernon se levantó y fue al ventanal.

—¿Ha visto a Crossjay? —le dijo a Clara.

—No; debería, si está ahí —dijo ella.

Clara salió y Vernon fue tras ella. Ambos tenían una excusa.

—¿Qué camino habrá tomado el pobre? —le preguntó Clara a Vernon.

—No tengo ni la más ligera idea —respondió—. Pero póngase su sombrero si quiere escapar de esa pareja de inquisidoras.

—¡Señor Whitford, qué humillación!

—Sospecho que no lo ha sentido usted por completo y que el final no puede estar lejos —dijo Vernon.

Fue así como, cuando lady Busshe y lady Culmer abandonaron el comedor, la señorita Middleton evitó ser citada como voz y mensajera.

Sir Willoughby se disculpó por su ausencia.

—Si yo fuera celoso, lo sería de ese muchacho, Crossjay.

—Es usted un hombre excelente y el mejor de los primos —fue la enigmática respuesta de lady Busshe.

Lady Culmer alabó la conversación extremadamente vivaz en su mesa.

—Aunque —dijo— no podría decir, ni aunque me fuera la vida en ello, qué significaba todo ni cuál era el sentido. ¿Ocurre todos los días lo mismo con usted?

—Desde luego.

—¡Debe de disfrutar de ese hechizo de opacidad!

—Si usted lo dice, ¡sencillez y no hablar para causar efecto! En general echo el ancla en Leticia Dale.

—¡Ah! —Lady Busshe tosió—. Pero el hecho es que a la señora Mountstuart la vuelve loca el ingenio.

—Creo, señora, que Leticia Dale es tan ingeniosa como cualquiera de las estrellas que la señora Mountstuart reúne o como yo.

—Me refiero al ingenio en la conversación.

—También en la conversación. Tal vez no le haya dado usted una oportunidad.

—Sí, sí, es ingeniosa, por supuesto, querida mía. Parece mejor también.

—Encantadora, creo —dijo lady Culmer.

—Cambia —observó sir Willoughby.

Las damas se sentaron en su carruaje y se entregaron enseguida a un coloquio en voz baja. No habían

hecho una sola alusión a los regalos de boda tras levantarse de la mesa del almuerzo. La causa de su visita era obvia.

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51 Alusión al romance *Valentinne and Orson,* en el que el protagonista (cuyo nombre significa «oso») irrumpe bruscamente en la corte.

52 Robert Louis Stevenson, amigo de Meredith, se haría eco de esta página en el inicio de *La isla del tesoro,* publicada cuatro años después que *El Egoísta* .

XXXVII

Contiene una esgrima inteligente e insinuaciones de su necesidad

ESA mujer, lady Busshe, había predicho, tras el acontecimiento, la defección de Constanza Durham. Cuando Willoughby partió de viaje, se había mostrado escéptica respecto a su arraigada adhesión a Leticia Dale. En su amarga vulgaridad, aquella rival agotada de la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson en el liderazgo del condado había tomado su nariz por un melancólico pronóstico de su fortuna; recientemente había explotado el nombre de Willoughby y hablado de su destino abominablemente inglés. Aunque sabía poco, estaba atenta a la peor interpretación de las apariencias. No se le había ocurrido otro elogio que llamarlo el mejor de los primos, porque alojaba y vestía y alimentaba a Vernon Whitford. ¡No tenía nada más que decir de un hombre al que consideraba desgraciado! Era una mujer carente de ingenio, despojada de estilo, pero rica y chismosa —una forja de chispas— y arrastraba a lady Culmer consigo. Las dos salieron de casa de Willoughby para extender el rumor maligno: golpearon al mundo mordaz en la herida abierta. Ninguna de ellas era como la señora Mountstuart, una mujer ingeniosa a la que podía engañarse; eran torpes y se atenían a su propia versión de los hechos: el único modo de confundir esas fuerzas inveteradas era anticiparse a ellas, coger el hecho esperado y transformarlo para sorprenderlas, cuando dieran con él, con algo que no habían previsto.

—Ya ven que estaban en un error, señoras.

—Lo estábamos, sir Willoughby, y lo reconocemos. ¡Nunca habríamos adivinado *eso!*

Así deliberaba la pareja fantasma en el futuro como lo habrían hecho con la revelación. Willoughby podía adelantarse.

Ay pero para combatir a esas bobas había que enfrentarse a los hechos, a los actos que se habían llevado lamentablemente en serio. Esas representantes de la población necia juzgaban por las circunstancias: muestras y apariencias ligeras no tenían efecto sobre ellas. La destreza en la esgrima quedaba relegada.

Una mirada fugaz al despiadado poder de la torpeza que nos obliga a llevar a cabo algo concreto en contra de nuestras inclinaciones, si quisiéramos confundir su terrible instinto, le dio a Willoughby por un momento la visión de conjunto de un sabio. La intensidad de su sentimiento personal encendía a intervalos una iluminación tan vívida de la humanidad que habría sido individualmente sabio si la fuente de sus agudas percepciones no hubiera suscitado en él una sensación personal de oposición a su propia sagacidad. Aborreció y despreció esa visión, de manera que no obtuvo beneficio de ella, aunque estaba preparado para tenerla. Prefirió (y la opción está a disposición de todos) que la distinción que revelaba entre él mismo y la humanidad lo adulara.

Pero si él no era como los demás, ¿por qué estaba desconcertado y se mostraba solícito y se sentía miserable? Pensar que debía ser así contradecía las teorías de conquistador en las que había sido adiestrado y que, mientras había tenido éxito, habían otorgado el éxito al mérito natal y la grandeza al magnánimo, como la luz ilumina la luz: la naturaleza ofrece el ejemplo. Su temprano adiestramiento, sus brillantes inicios en la vida, le habían enseñado a contemplar los principales frutos de la vida como su parte natural y se debía a una muchacha que ahora estuviera en la boca de todos, estremeciéndose ante la posible malignidad de un par de brujas. ¿Por qué no se quitaba de encima a la muchacha?

Entonces ¡sería libre para disfrutar, sin preocupaciones, más joven que su juventud en la reaparición de su felicidad!

Entonces las ventanas de su nariz empezarían a abrirse y advertir las insinuaciones de un espeso y pestífero vapor. Entonces discerniría en ese voluminoso hedor la mirada hosca y turbia de la malicia. La tierra se poblaría de malaria a su alrededor. El aliento del mundo, la opinión del mundo sobre él, era en parte su aliento vital, la opinión que él tenía de sí mismo. Los ancestros de este hombre torturado le habían legado esa condición de una elevada civilización entre otros legados. A nuestros débiles Egoístas de la choza y la basura no les preocupa la opinión pública; solo anhelan libertad y ocio para rascarse y aliviarse cuando se rascan en exceso. Willoughby era expansivo, floreciente; había nacido para mirar por encima del hombro a un mundo tributario y mostrarse exultante al ser contemplado. ¿Nos extraña su consternación ante la perspectiva de un mundo que eche pestes de él? Los príncipes tienen obligaciones que les recuerdan que son mortales y el brillante heredero de un mundo tributario está encadenado del mismo modo por el homenaje que el mundo le rinde; más aún, en la medida en que es inmaterial, elusivo, un homenaje que no se basa en los impuestos y en que no puede castigar con la pena de muerte a los que traicioneramente se lo niegan. Sin

embargo, ha de ser brillante, debe cortejar a su pueblo. Ha de mostrarle siempre, tanto en su reputación como en su persona, por dolido que esté, que tiene un rostro y una pierna.

El herido caballero se encerró en su laboratorio, donde podía ir de un lado a otro y estirar sus brazos en busca de alivio físico, observando con seguridad sus formas fantásticas con la idea de que estaba meditando. Tal vez le bastara para poder imaginar en el intenso fuego cruzado entre sus nervios y la situación; los destellos eran notables. No reconocía encontrarse en la agonía; solo era un deseo de ejercicio.

Quintaesencia de la mundanidad, la señora Mountstuart apareció por el más lejano de los ventanales, con las faldas al vuelo al final del césped, mientras Horacio De Craye sonreía de satisfacción a su lado. La cacareada penetración de la mujer era incapaz de detectar el histriónico irlandesismo de su acompañante o tal vez le gustara por su absurdo; no solo a ella. La bestia voluble había sido creada para atrapar a las mujeres. A Willoughby le remordió la conciencia la adoración de la constancia en las mujeres. La encarnación de aquella divina cualidad cruzó por sus ojos. Iba ataviada de belleza.

Una horrible convulsión no descrita compuesta de bostezos y gemidos lo empujó a sus instrumentos para evitar una renovación de aquel golpe y, mientras los arreglaba y disponía para su involuntaria tarea, se comparó ventajosamente a sí mismo con hombres como Vernon y De Craye, y otros del condado, sus compañeros en el coto de caza y en el tribunal de magistrados, que no entendían ni se preocupaban por el trabajo sólido, el benéfico trabajo práctico, el trabajo de la ciencia.

Tuvo que renunciar a ello: le temblaban las manos.

—Los experimentos no avanzarán mucho a este paso —dijo, arrojando la culpa del retraso nocivo sobre sus enemigos.

Era indiscutible que debía hablar con la señora Mountstuart, por mucho que retrocediera ante la prueba de sus músculos faciales. Que ella no hubiera acudido a él parecía ominoso y su conducta en la mesa del almuerzo no había sido demasiado oscura. Era evidente que había instigado al caballero a replicar y contradecir a lady Busshe y lady Culmer. ¿Con qué propósito?

Los rasgos de Clara le dieron la respuesta.

Eran implacables. Los suyos podían serlo.

En la soledad de su habitación estalló: «¡Lo juro, no la entregaré nunca a Horacio De Craye! Que pase por alguno de mis tormentos y trate de sacar de ellos lo mejor sabiendo que los merece». Lo había dicho y era un juramento registrado.

El deseo de hacerle un daño intolerable se convirtió en un éxtasis en sus venas y produjo otro espasmo, durante el cual fue un espectáculo para la señora Mountstuart en uno de los ventanales. Se rio al ir hacia ella, diciendo:

—No, hoy no trabajaré; no saldría, lo dejo por completo.

—Me llevo al profesor —dijo ella—. Está inquieto por el resfriado que ha cogido.

Sir Willoughby le salió al paso.

—He tratado de trabajar una hora para no estar ocioso todo el día.

—¿Trabaja en esa madriguera todos los días?

—Nunca menos de una hora, si puedo aprovecharla.

—¡Es un recurso admirable!

La observación lo puso en tensión y le hizo pensar que una prolongación de su crisis lo expondría a las incursiones de alguna enfermedad orgánica, posiblemente una dolencia cardíaca.

—Un hábito —dijo—. Allí pongo el mundo a un lado.

—Veremos los resultados a su debido tiempo.

—No prometo nada: quiero estar a la altura del conocimiento real de mi tiempo, eso es todo.

—¡Una perla entre nuestros caballeros rurales!

—Una consideración muy amable, mi querida señora. En general, sería más sensato convertirme en un charlatán y llevar un cuaderno de anécdotas. No podría hacerlo, simplemente porque no sabría vivir con mi vaciedad solo para hacer de vez en cuando una exhibición de fuegos artificiales. Aspiro a la solidez. Es una aspiración modesta, sin duda, no demasiado apreciada.

—Leticia Dale la aprecia.

Una sonrisa forzada de arrepentimiento, como una hoja doblándose con el calor, hizo que su boca se frunciera.

¿Por qué no le contaba a la señora Mountstuart su conversación con Clara?

—¿Han cogido a Crossjay? —dijo Willoughby.

—En apariencia le han dado caza.

Era probable que la timidez hubiera podido con Clara.

—¿Tiene que dejarnos?

—Creo que es prudente llevarme al profesor Crooklyn.

—¿Aún...?

—¡El parecido es extraordinario!

—Una palabra aparte al doctor Middleton lo despejaría.

—Usted es muy bueno.

Ese odioso encomio de conmiseración lo traspasó. ¡Ella conocía su calamidad!

—Filosófico —dijo— sería el término adecuado, creo.

—El coronel De Craye, por cierto, ha prometido visitarme cuando le deje a usted.

—¿Mañana?

—Cuanto antes mejor. Es cautivador, delicioso. Me ha conquistado en cinco minutos. No lo acuso. La naturaleza lo ha dotado para el hechizo. Somos mujeres débiles, sir Willoughby.

¡Sabía!

—Lo semejante con lo semejante: el ingenio con el ingenio, madam.

—¿No querrá hacerme un cumplido con un poco de celos?

—Me abstendré de hacerle un cumplido *a él* .

—Sea filosófico, desde luego, si tiene usted la filosofía. Yo la simulo. Probablemente supongo que tengo éxito porque no me hace demasiada falta. No sabría decirlo. Somos enigmas para nosotros mismos.

La señora Mountstuart picó la turba con la punta de su parasol. Miró arriba y abajo.

—¿Bien? —le dijo Willoughby a los ojos.

—Bien. ¿Dónde está Leticia Dale?

Willoughby se giró para mostrar su rostro de otra manera.

Cuando volvió a mirarla directamente, la señora Mountstuart parecía rígida y movió la cabeza.

—No funcionará, mi querido sir Willoughby.

—¿El qué?

—Eso.

—No he sabido nunca resolver enigmas.

—Tocar ta-ta-ta *ad infinitum* . Las cosas han ido demasiado lejos. Todas las partes se alegrarían de irse de excursión. Envíela a casa.

—¿A Leticia? No puedo separarme de ella.

La señora Mountstuart se mordió el labio inferior mientras volvía a negar con la cabeza.

—¿En qué puede resultar perjudicial que esté aquí, madam? —se atrevió a insistir.

—Piense.

—Ella es una prueba.

—¡Dos veces!

Las palabras eran artillería pesada. Trató de afectar una estupidez absorta. Ella podía ver cómo le latía el corazón y Willoughby dejó caer la máscara con una mueca agradable.

—Es inaccesible. Es amiga mía. Doy fe de ella, por mi honor. No la tema. Le ruego que confíe en mí. Antes perecería. No hay alma sobre la tierra que pueda compararse con ella.

La señora Mountstuart repitió:

—¡Dos veces!

Las dos palabras, pronunciadas musicalmente en el mismo tono de advertencia de un fantasma amable, desataron un trueno que lo enloqueció, pero no se atrevió a luchar contra ellas en términos sencillos.

—¿Se trata de mí? —dijo.

—¡No funcionará, sir Willoughby!

La señora Mountstuart lo azuzaba hasta el frenesí.

—Mi querida señora Mountstuart, ha estado usted oyendo cuentos. No soy un tirano. Soy uno de los hombres de trato más fácil que haya. Preservemos las formas debidas a la sociedad: no diré nada más. En cuanto al pobre Vernon, la gente me considera un buen primo; me gustaría verlo cómodamente casado, decentemente casado esta vez. Me he propuesto contribuir a que se establezca. Lo menciono para mostrar que el caso se ha considerado desde un punto de vista práctico. Ha tenido una experiencia tolerablemente amarga de ese estado; podría inclinarse si, digamos, lo llevara usted de la mano a otra aventura. Es una lotería desmoralizadora. Sin embargo, el gobierno la sanciona.

—Pero, sir Willoughby, ¿de qué serviría que lo llevara de la mano si, como usted me ha dicho, Leticia Dale lo respalda?

—Lo hace.

—Entonces hablamos sin necesidad, salvo que usted quiera confundirla.

Willoughby permitió que una sonrisa latente iluminara una vislumbre de sentido.

—No es usted demasiado considerada al atribuirme ese oficio.

—¿Le preocupa el peligro?

La señora Mountstuart casi se burlaba.

Acuciado por su tono, Willoughby dijo:

—Amo tanto la constancia en el carácter que sería un mal abogado si tratara de romperlo. Francamente, conozco el peligro. Salvé mi honor cuando lo intenté: eso es todo cuanto puedo decir.

—Le doy mi palabra —la señora Mountstuart echó atrás la cabeza para que sus ojos lo contemplaran sumariamente por encima de su hermoso puente aquilino— de que su corazón es misterioso, mi buen amigo.

—Abandono la idea de Leticia Dale.

—¿Y con quién casará a su primo Vernon? ¿Dónde estamos?

—Como le he dicho, madam, soy un hombre de trato fácil. No tengo un ápice de tirano. Tal vez una criatura destemplada cogida por el cuello tenga esa noción de mí mientras se esfuerza por librarse tan pronto como le ponen la soga. Pero me opongo estricta y severamente al escándalo de las separaciones violentas, a los quebrantamientos notorios de compromisos solemnes, a la ruptura pública. Suponiendo que yo sea la causa, no consentiré una violación del decoro. ¿Está claro? Es posible arreglar las cosas de manera que las partes sean felices a su manera sin alboroto. Recuerde que no soy yo quien lo quiere así. Soy, y me veo forzado a serlo, pasivo. Pero no seré un obstáculo.

Se detuvo, agitando la mano para dar a entender la vanidad de seguir hablando.

Una concepción de sir Willoughby, que la incredulidad había frustrado, excitó la inteligencia de la dama.

—¡Bien! —exclamó—. Me ha situado usted en el terreno de la conjetura. Como mi marido solía decir, no veo la luz, pero creo que veo al lince que la ve. No vamos a discutir ahora. Debo de ser una mujer más joven de lo que supongo, pues estoy aprendiendo mucho. Ahí vienen el profesor, abotonado hasta las orejas, y el doctor Middleton, ondeando con la brisa. Habrá una tos y una nota al pie en referencia a la joven de la estación si seguimos juntos, así que le ruego que pida mi carruaje.

—¿Encontró usted a Clara complaciente? ¿Pícara?

—Vendré mañana. Ha simplificado usted mi tarea, sir Willoughby, mucho; quiero decir, dando por hecho que no le he malentendido del todo. Estoy a oscuras, tanto que he de ayudarme a mí misma recordando que lady Busshe se opuso a mi opinión en cierto asunto. El escepticismo es su fuerte. Será la cosa más rara al fin y al cabo... No, debo confesarlo, el romance no ha desaparecido. ¿Le gustan los embaucadores?

—Detesto a esa raza.

—Una respuesta excelente. Podría perdonarlo por ello.

La señora Mountstuart se abstuvo de añadir:

—Si no es que está convirtiéndome en uno de ellos.

Sir Willoughby fue a pedir su carruaje.

Ella sabía. Era palpable: Clara lo había traicionado. «Cuanto antes el coronel De Craye se marche de Patterne Hall mejor»; ella lo había dicho, y que «todas las partes se alegrarían de irse de excursión». Conocía la posición de las cosas y adivinaba el resto. Pero lo que no sabía, ni podía adivinar, era el hombre con el que practicaba la esgrima. Willoughby especulaba sobre los ingeniosos y los torpes. Esos últimos eran la masa formidable. Tenían hechos para convencerlos; lo habían precipitado, se confesaba a sí mismo, en la esfera nueva de sus oscuras insinuaciones a la señora Mountstuart, de la que la más profunda oscuridad le permitiría escapar, aunque lo abrazara singularmente, incluso de una manera agradable, con la sensación de un hecho consumado.

Lo abrazaba de una manera muy agradable. Había un final para sus torturas. Navegaba en un mar tranquilo, marido de una mujer constante, no de una pícara. La belleza eminente de la constancia en las mujeres investía a Leticia de gracias que Clara no podía superar. Una mujer probada, constante, es la joya de su sexo. Apunta hacia su marido como el girasol; su amor lo ilumina; ella vive en él, testimonia su valía, pone el mundo a sus pies, dirige el coro de sus alabanzas, justifica su propia estima. ¡No hay en la tierra belleza como esa!

Aunque tuviéramos que pasar por la angustia para descubrirla y acariciar la paz que depara, para cogerla, llamarla nuestra, la recompensa sería plena.

Ensimismado en su ensoñación, le dijo adiós a la señora Mountstuart y siguió por la avenida tras el carruaje, sin querer ver a Leticia hasta que hubiera apurado el sabor de la fantasía que rumiaba.

¡Supongámoslo hecho!

Sería generoso por su parte. Redundaría en su crédito.

Su hogar sería una fortaleza, inexpugnable a las lenguas. Tendría una seguridad divina en su hogar.

Alguien que lo leía y conocía y adoraba se sentaría allí como una estrella: sentada allí, esperándolo, su estrella fija.

Sería un matrimonio con un espejo, con un eco; un matrimonio con un espejo resplandeciente, un eco de coro.

Sería un matrimonio con un intelecto, con una hermosa comprensión: hacer de su hogar una fuente de ingenio reiterable, hacer de su querido Patterne Hall la luminaria del condado.

Le dio vueltas como a un canto, con algo de animadversión discordante de vez en cuando hacia lady Busshe. Los duendes que lo rodeaban oyeron el furioso grito interior.

Enseguida se puso a pintar a Leticia con deleitosos colores humanos, como una miniatura del siglo pasado, reservando su figura ideal para su satisfacción privada. El mundo tenía que inclinarse ante su belleza visible y él le daría esmalte y brillo, una estatura mayor, un aire de soltura, una trascendencia que exorcizaba la imagen de la vieja bruja que lo había empujado a esto.

El resultado fue que Leticia se volvió para él humana y reconocidamente hermosa. Sus oscuras pestañas sobre la palidez de sus mejillas ayudaban a la transformación, que era una necesidad para él, así que se llevó a cabo. Willoughby recibió la impresión de cera.

El séquito de sus duendes tuvo una revelación. Oímos maravillas de los hombres y vemos alzarse las manos en el mundo. Las maravillas pueden explicarse y una mano no necesita interponerse si el hombre misterioso no estuviera acompañado de esa confraternidad de ojos de mono. Los duendes espían el corazón y sus giros.

El corazón es el caballero mágico. Ninguno de ellos iría donde no hubiera corazón. Los giros del corazón son la comedia.

El secreto del corazón es su acuciante amor a sí mismo, dice el Libro.

Gracias a ese secreto, el misterio del órgano es legible y una comparación entre el corazón y el arroyo de montaña nos muestra la fuerza imbatible del pequeño canal que trata de adquirir su volumen y se esfuerza en ello, sinuosamente, siempre en busca de sí mismo: sin otra ocupación que ser la fuerza más singular de nuestra tierra. Nos orientamos en las sinuosidades por los instructivos puestos de observación.

Pocos se mantienen en ellos. La gente ve y se apresura a intercambiar las manos levantadas al verlo en lugar de estudiar pacientemente el fenómeno de la energía.

En consecuencia, un hombre enamorado de una mujer, casi con una conciencia absoluta, detrás del más leve de los velos, preparándose para amar a otra, no resulta creíble. El hambre particular del forzado, pero adaptable corazón es la clave de ese hombre. Contemplemos el arroyo de montaña convertido en corriente, convertido en torrente, rodeando una roca considerable: si la roca no lo sigue, se agolpa sobre ella, se extiende hasta donde tal vez se haya levantado una presa de suficiente profundidad para retenerlo y refrenar su inquietud desordenada. Leticia representaba ese espacio de paz en perspectiva.

Pero ya no era joven. Willoughby era consciente de ello y sistemáticamente se contemplaba a sí mismo con los ojos desorbitados de ella, la aceptaba con benevolencia, como un dios agradecido por la adoración y usaba la divinidad que ella impartía para pintarla y renovarla. Su corazón lo requería. El corazón abre las fuentes de la imaginación; la imaginación recibía el encargo del corazón y era una artista astuta.

Astuta hasta tal punto de genio seductor que la obra maestra que ofreció a su contemplación lo capacitó simultáneamente para mirar a Clara y pensar en Leticia. Clara venía desde las puertas del parque con Vernon, una muchacha brillante, sin duda, y trivial: una criatura sana y un animal; atractiva pero caprichosa, impaciente, traicionera, sucia; una mujer que arrastraba a los hombres al fango. Clara se acercó.

XXXVIII

En el que damos un paso hacia el centro del egoísmo

Se encontraron. Vernon los dejó pronto.

—¿No habéis visto a Crossjay? —preguntó Willoughby.

—No —dijo Clara—. Una vez más te pido que lo perdones. Mintió por su idea juvenil de la caballerosidad.

—La caballerosidad con el sexo que comienza por mentir acaba creando el héroe de una mujer al que vemos por el mundo y en algunos tribunales.

La habilidad de Willoughby para acallar a Clara era grande: no podía replicar a un discurso como ese.

—Has hecho —dijo él— de la señora Mountstuart una confidente.

—Sí.

—Esta es tu bolsa.

—Te lo agradezco.

—El profesor Crooklyn se las ha arreglado para dar a conocer a tu padre tu proyecto. Ese, supongo, es el billete de tren en el pliegue de la bolsa. El profesor se aseguró de que habías tomado un billete para Londres y no necesitarías el calesín.

—Es cierto. Estaba aturdida.

—Has dado un agradable paseo con Vernon. ¿Habéis aludido a mi persona?

—No hemos hablado de ti. Aludes a algo que él no consentiría.

—Es un hombre honesto, a su anticuada manera. Un tipo reservado. ¿Te ha hablado alguna vez de su mujer?

A Clara se le cayó la bolsa, se agachó y la recogió.

—No sé nada de los asuntos del señor Whitford —dijo, abriendo la bolsa y rompiendo en pedazos el billete de tren.

—La historia es una prueba de que los espíritus románticos no proporcionan los elementos más románticos. La palabra *caballerosidad* está frecuentemente en tus labios. Vernon se casó caballerosamente con la hija de un arrendatario con el que residía antes de que yo lo tomara. Nos enteramos de la feliz unión en un breve del periódico que informaba de la ebriedad y el alboroto que la señora Whitford causó en una estación terminal de Londres, probablemente la misma a la que te habría conducido el billete que tomaste ayer, pues oí decir que la señora tenía la intención de venir aquí en busca de suministros, pues la despensa connubial estaba vacía.

—Lo siento, no lo sabía; no había oído nada, no sé nada —dijo Clara.

—Estás disgustada. Pero la mitad de los estudiantes y autores de los que has oído hablar se casa de esa manera. Y pocos tienen la suerte de Vernon.

—¿No tenía ella buenas cualidades?

El labio inferior le colgaba.

Parecía a disgusto. Willoughby le pidió que no permitiera ese sentimiento.

—Los literatos, ya se sabe, incluso con acceso a la sociedad, carecen de gusto para las mujeres. Su objetivo es el ama de casa. Temen a las damas y, sin duda, serían para ellos un fastidio y un estorbo en casa.

—Has dicho que tuvo suerte.

—Le tienes cariño.

—Lo respeto.

—Es un hombre amable a su extraña manera; honorable y demás. Pero una alianza de mala reptación como esa se pega a un hombre. El mundo habla. Sí, tuvo suerte. Cayó en el fango y salió de él. Si se casara otra vez...

—¿Ella...?

—Murió. No te asustes; fue una muerte natural. Atendió a los únicos deseos que le quedaban a la familia de Vernon. Enterró a la mujer y yo lo acogí. Me lo llevé a mi viaje. Un segundo matrimonio cubriría el primero; correría algún rumor sobre el viejo asunto: me atrevo a decir que los parientes de la mujer le escribirían, tratarían de sangrarlo. Como quiera que sea, ahora entenderás su melancolía. No creo que lamente su pérdida. Probablemente sea un sentimental, como la mayoría de los hombres cuando se libra de una carga. No debes pensar lo peor de él.

—No lo hago —dijo Clara.

—Lo defiendo cada vez que se discute el asunto.

—Espero que lo hagas.

—Sin aprobar su locura. No puedo limpiarlo.

Estaban a las puertas de la casa. Clara esperaba cualquier comunicación que a él le pluguiera hacer y, como no hubo ninguna, subió a su habitación.

Willoughby la había lanzado deliberadamente a Vernon no solo sin pesar, sino con una intensa satisfacción. El corazón es el hechicero.

A continuación Willoughby se dirigió a Leticia.

La mente vacilaba con algo de culpa; los pies siguieron adelante.

Leticia estaba ocupada con una labor de encaje junto a una ventana abierta. El coronel De Craye se apoyaba en el exterior y Willoughby perdonó el aire de recatada diversión de ella al oírle decir al coronel:

—No, he tenido media hora de las más agradables de mi vida y preferiría quedarme ocioso aquí, si lo estuviera usted, a emplear mis facultades paseando a caballo.

—No se pierde el tiempo conversando con la señorita Dale —dijo Willoughby.

La luz acariciaba el rostro de Leticia, sentada a medias en la sombra.

De Craye preguntó si habían cogido a Crossjay. Leticia murmuró una palabra amable para el muchacho. Willoughby examinó el encaje.

Entraron las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel.

La invitaron a salir a pasear en calesa con ellas.

Leticia no respondió enseguida y Willoughby observó:

—La señorita Dale estaba riñendo a Horacio por ocioso y os recomiendo que lo alistéis para que cumpla su deber, mientras yo lo relevo aquí.

Las señoritas solo tuvieron que mirar al coronel. De Craye estaba a su disposición si ellas querían servirse de él. Se marchó con ellas.

Leticia se aplicó a sus hilos.

—El coronel De Craye ha mencionado a Crossjay —dijo—. ¿Puedo esperar de usted que haya perdonado al muchacho, sir Willoughby?

Willoughby respondió:

—Defiéndalo.

—Querría ser elocuente.

—En mi opinión lo es.

—Si Crossjay ha sido ofensivo, no ha sido por mezquindad. En la escuela, entre camaradas, brillaría. Su luz es muy fuerte. Sus sentimientos y su naturaleza moral están sobreexcitados.

—No era así cuando estaba en casa con usted.

—Yo soy severa, soy dura.

—¡Una madre espartana!

—Mi sistema para manejar a un muchacho seguiría ese modelo, salvo en esto: él habría de sentir que podría ser perdonado.

—¿No a costa de la justicia?

—¡Ah! Las criaturas jóvenes no han de pasar por el alto tribunal. Me parece peligroso aterrorizar su imaginación. Si lo hacemos, ¿no es probable que demos lugar al mismo mal que combatimos? Las alternativas para el joven han de ser la escuela y el hogar, y en sus corazones ha de haber confianza en que el perdón se alternará con la disciplina. Son de una edad demasiado tierna para el rigor del mundo; corremos el riesgo de endurecerlos. Le demuestro que no tengo elocuencia. Me ha alentado usted a hablar, sir Willoughby.

—Habla con sensatez, Leticia.

—Creo que es cierto lo que digo. ¿No ha reflexionado en ello? Solo tiene que hacerlo para perdonarlo. Estoy siendo osada y tendré que pedir perdón para mí misma.

—¿Sigue escribiendo? ¿Ha continuado trabajando con la pluma? —dijo Willoughby.

—Un poco, muy poco.

—No quiero que se malgaste usted, que se eche a perder, en público. Es usted demasiado valiosa para alimentar a la bestia. Dar incesantemente debe terminar por atenuarlo todo. Resérvese para sus amigos. ¿Por qué habrían de verse privados de tantas cosas de usted? ¿No es razonable suponer que quedando en barbecho se enriquecerá usted para la vida doméstica? Cándidamente, si tuviera autoridad confiscaría su pluma: *Fuera con esa fruslería* . No me encontrará citando con frecuencia a Cromwell, pero sus palabras se aplican a este caso. Diría más bien esa lanceta. Tal vez sea el término más correcto. La sangra a usted, la echa a perder. ¿Para qué? ¡Por el aliento de la fama!

—Escribo por dinero.

—Y con ello —diría de otro— se somete usted al riesgo de la degradación mental. ¿Quién sabe? ¡Moral! Traficar con el cerebro por dinero lo pone al nivel de los compradores. Confisco su pluma, Leticia.

—Será confiscar su regalo, sir Willoughby.

—Entonces eso demuestra... ¿Cuándo fue eso?

—Me envió usted una pluma dorada por mi decimosexto cumpleaños.

—Eso demuestra mi falta de consideración entonces y después. ¡Después!

Apoyó el codo sobre su rodilla y se cubrió los ojos, murmurando con una voz profunda acechada por un pasado contrito: «¡Después!»

Podía hacerse. Había llegado a la conclusión de que podía hacerse, aunque el esfuerzo por armonizar la figura que se sentaba cerca de él con la artística figura de sus pigmentos más puros le había costado trabajo y parpadeos. También eso podía hacerse. El tono ameno de Leticia, su sensata conversación y la luz favorable sobre su rostro le ayudaron en su esfuerzo. Leticia era una copa sobria, sobria y sana. El delirio es para la adolescencia. Los hombres que buscan copas tóxicas llaman a los hados.

Curiosamente, por mucho que pudieran afirmarse las cosas, el marido de esa mujer podría jactarse de sus virtudes y tesoros en cualquier parte aunque no pudiera —era imposible decir por qué no— jactarse de una mujer hermosa o intelectual. Uno de sus méritos como esposa sería ese mérito extraordinariamente natural de un carácter que pedía color a la mano marital y lo tomaría.

Leticia no tenía por qué enterarse de cuanto lo turbaba. Su asombro ante la exposición de su pena produjo un vago pestañeo de alarma. Era nerviosa; esperaba un estallido de pesar o de pasión.

—¿Puedo esperar que perdone a Crossjay? —dijo.

—Amiga mía —dijo él, descubriendo el rostro—, me rijo por principios. Convénzame de un error y no seguiré obstinadamente un curso premeditado. Pero usted me conoce. Los hombres que carecen de principios para dirigir su conducta son... Bueno, son indignos de media hora de compañía con usted. Hablaré con usted esta noche. Tengo que despachar algunas cartas. Esta noche, a las doce, en la habitación donde hablamos por última vez. O espéreme en el salón. He de atender a mis invitados hasta tarde.

Se inclinó. Tenía prisa por irse.

Podía hacerse. Debía hacerse. Era su destino.

XXXIX

En el corazón del Egoísta

PERO ya había empezado a pensar en el hecho como su ejecutor. Temió encontrarse con Clara. La locura de haberla retenido se alzó ante él. ¿Cómo mirarla ahora y mantener una resolución sensata sin vacilar? Clara era una tentación de insania. Si se hubiera ido, él habría podido llevar a cabo el hecho compuesto por la sensación de estar cumpliendo su deber consigo mismo, tal vez odiando levemente a la desgraciada a la que había hecho feliz al final, siendo amable con ella, cortés. La presencia de Clara en la casa antes del hecho y ¡oh cielos!, después, era una amenaza para su ingenio. ¿Orgullo? No lo tenía. Lo había arrojado para que ella se entrampara y lo había recogido al paso. Sí; tenía orgullo, lo tenía como un puñal en el pecho: su orgullo era su miseria. Pero era demasiado orgulloso para someterse a la miseria. «Lo que hago está bien». Dijo las palabras y la rectitud allanó su camino hasta que la pregunta clamó por la respuesta: ¿consentiría y respaldaría el mundo su orgullo por Leticia? En una época, sí. ¿Y ahora?

La belleza de Clara ascendió y lo iluminó.

Estamos a bordo del barco de la humanidad castigado por la tormenta, cuando suenan los gritos y réplicas, el desorden se apodera de la tripulación y la furia de la autoconservación la divide: uno piensa en el barco, otro en su vida. Clara era lo primero para él; Leticia lo segundo. Pero ¿qué ocurría si no era más seguro aferrarse tenazmente a Clara que dejarla a un lado por Leticia? No, ella había hecho cosas que habían herido su orgullo en lo más vivo. Ella se había arrastrado primero por uno y luego por otro; lo había traicionado ante Vernon y ante la señora Mountstuart; una mirada a los ojos de Horacio De Craye decía que también ante él. ¿Ante quién no? Podía retenerla para vengarse, pero ese apetito era efímero en él si no alimentaba sus propósitos. «Descarto toda idea de venganza», dijo, y le escoció ardientemente su admiración por alguien que podía ser tan magnánimo ante una ofensa mortal: cuanto más admirable, más digno de lástima. Sorbió una gota o dos de lástima por sí mismo como si fuera un veneno, repeliendo los asaltos de la conmiseración pública. Debía dejar a Clara. El mundo tenía que ver que, como él sentía, lo que hacía era correcto. Laocoonte de sus propias serpientes, se debatió con una actitud magnífica en la red de constricciones que había extendido a su alrededor. Debía dejar a Clara. ¡Oh radiante abominación! Debía dejarla, pero no debía entregársela a alguien cuyo tacto sería como una flecha en el corazón del que la entregaba, como una serpiente en su lecho; debía entregársela a alguien que la extinguiera, que fuera la segunda mujer de un semirrecluso anticuado que hubiera sido desgraciado con la primera. Y si se supiera públicamente que ella había sido expulsada y había acudido al viejo Vernon en busca de refugio y, en parte, por despecho, en parte por vergüenza, en parte por desesperación, en parte por un asomo de sentido común dadas las circunstancias, se casara con él, su belleza no influiría en el mundo a la hora de juzgar. El mundo sabría qué pensar. Como el instinto de autoconservación le susurraba a Willoughby, al mundo, si fuera necesario, podría enseñársele a pensar lo que decididamente no debía pensar si a ella se le viera acercarse al altar con Horacio De Craye. Autoconservación, no venganza, decía ese susurro. Willoughby se detenía en la iniquidad de Clara para justificarlo sin desear hacerle un daño permanente —era un hombre elevadamente civilizado—, aunque con una firme intención de concederle todo el beneficio del escándalo, suponiendo el escándalo o las habladurías ordinarias.

«Y así se la entregó a su primo y secretario, Vernon Whitford, que abrió la boca y cerró los ojos».

¿Oímos al mundo? ¿Cómo impediremos que deje de chismorrear? Ya era suficiente que Willoughby no albergara el deseo de hacerle daño a Clara. Algunas anticipaciones de su macha eran imperativas y le salieron al paso espontáneamente; de otro modo la radiación de aquella brillante abominación habría sido insufrible; no habría podido soportarla; no la habría entregado nunca.

Además, un efecto feliz era el resultado. Willoughby conjuró las habladurías anticipadas y se encogió de hombros ante el mundo de una manera tan vívida que la belleza de Clara se marchitó con la mancha, despojada de su formidable magnetismo. Podía enfrentarse a ella con calma; se había acerado a sí mismo. La pureza en las mujeres era su principal estipulación y una mujer contaminada no era la persona que pudiera hacerle temblar.

Considerémoslo con indulgencia: el Egoísta es el hijo de sí mismo. Y el padre. Y el hijo ama al padre, el padre al hijo; intercambian el afecto con el más estrecho de los vínculos y, si ven una conducta ofensiva para alguno de los dos, ¿no aborrecerán al criminal? No ofenderán a nadie, pero no consentirán ver sufrir al otro ni anhelar en vano. Los dos se frotan entre sí con simpatía en una intensa relación. Si nos sacrifican, sin

una ofensa excesiva, será en el altar de su mutuo amor a la piedad filial o la ternura paternal: el más joven ofrece un delicado bocado al más viejo o el más viejo al más joven. Absortos en su gran ejemplo de devoción, no piensan en nosotros. Son hermosos.

Sin embargo, es cierto que el más joven tiene las pasiones de la juventud, de donde provienen las divisiones entre ellos, y ese es un estado trágico. Resultan patéticos. Ese era el estado de sir Willoughby al prestar oído al mayor hasta que mordió la fruta que le proponía y que el venerable padre, torciendo la boca, prefirió no señalar. Al menos, hasta donde percibimos, una mitad de él estaba maduro en lo que se refiere a la sabiduría de sus intereses. La parte más cruda solo tenía que obedecer el liderazgo de sagacidad para que sus intereses estuvieran seguros y le ayudaba una disposición filial, dolorosamente, de hecho; pero esa misma cualidad rara llevó al buen caballero a engullir su pena. Que el hijo lamentara su destino era un deshonor para el padre. Veneró y se sometió. Digamos que considerarlo con indulgencia es una apelación a la caridad excesiva tratándose de alguien que no requiere más que una anatomía inicial —cortar por la mitad— para ser exonerado, incluso exaltado. El Egoísta es nuestro manantial, el hombre primordial: el primitivo vuelto a nacer, la reconstitución de lo elemental. Vuelto a nacer en condiciones nuevas, el hombre primitivo puede ser el más refinado de los hombres sin renunciar a nada salvo a la rudeza de su naturaleza original. No es solo su propio padre; es el nuestro y también es nuestro hijo. Lo hemos producido nosotros, él a nosotros. Así éramos, a eso volvemos: no a otro, canta el poeta, sino a quien laboriosamente opone su chalupa a la marea, *si bracchia forte remisit* [53] . Dejemos que por azar afloje el trabajo de los brazos, por crecida que sea la corriente, y vuelva *in pejus* al principio de nuestro ser, con semillas y plantas tan cuidadosamente sopesadas en la mano como indiscriminadamente esparcidas, igual que nuestra humanidad.

También podría citarse a los poetas para asegurar que el hombre primitivo no es un degenerado: más bien es una señal de la indestructibilidad de la raza, de la antigua energía en remover los obstáculos al crecimiento individual, una muestra de lo que seríamos si tuviéramos su poder concentrado. Es el inocente original, puro, sencillo. Somos nosotros los que hemos caído, los que nos hemos mezclado en la sociedad, diluido nuestra esencia, disuelto. Él permanece en medio, monumental, un hito de las épocas obstinadas y honestas, con el alfabeto simbólico de brazos que golpean y piernas que corren, nuestro primer lenguaje, garabateado en su persona, y la gloriosa hacha de sílex y la punta de flecha en su blasón: al mismo tiempo un montículo de restos y nuestra producción más madura.

Pero la sociedad lo rodea. El espectáculo ocasional del primitivo oscilando en una cuerda ha impreso en el Egoísta la fuerza de su enemigo natural. Apenas ha dado la espalda a esa vista desfavorable para contemplar la ráfaga que sopla sobre la reputación de haber sido irrespetuoso con la multitud. A través de la meditación sobre el contraste de las circunstancias de la vida ha empezado a latir el pulso de la imaginación. El Egoísta entra en la esfera superior o círculo de egoísmo espiritual: se convierte en el Egoísta civilizado; primitivo aún, tan seguro como que el hombre tiene dientes, pero desarrollado en su manera de usarlos.

Degenerado o no (y no hay razón para suponerlo), sir Willoughby era un Egoísta social, furiosamente imaginativo en lo que le concernía. Había descubierto un reino mayor que el de los apetitos sensuales y se adentró en él en su periodo de conquista con el orgullo de un Alejandro. De esos viajes se había traído a Constanza, luego a Clara; cualquiera que hubiera sido el caso de la señorita Durham, en el de la señorita Middleton es casi seguro que ella había captado un destello de su interior de la profunda fatiga al oírlo hablar de ello. Lo que él había revelado no era la causa de la enfermedad de Clara: las mujeres soportan las revelaciones; son excitantes, salvo por la monotonía. Willoughby había matado la imaginación. Arrastró a Clara por los laberintos de sus penetrales en su hambrienta codicia de ser amado cada vez más, hasta que la imaginación entregó al fantasma y Willoughby habló, para el oído sencillo de Clara, como un monstruo. Debió de ser así, pues el hechizo del hombre primitivo predomina sobre las mujeres hasta el momento del contacto.

«Y así se la entregó a su primo y secretario, Vernon Whitford, que abrió la boca y cerró los ojos».

La cuestión urgente era cómo llevarlo a cabo. Willoughby pensó en el asunto con todo su poder de concentración, un poder que lo había llevado con frecuencia a sentir y decir que, como abogado, diplomático o general se habría ganado sus galones; concediéndole un interés personal en el asunto, habría logrado la eminencia: planeaba y esgrimía admirablemente.

Proyectó una escena a la que siguieron expresiones de ansiedad a propósito del viejo Vernon y su futuro establecimiento; entonces —Clara mantenía su perseverancia, a la que Willoughby se había acostumbrado tanto que no podía imaginar un cambio en ella— dice: «Si te decides a romper, te devolveré tu palabra *con una condición*» . Ella se sobresalta; él insiste en la promesa de ella; ella declina; el asunto retoma su curso anterior; ella se inquieta, pide la revelación; él la adula diciéndole que desea mantenerla en la familia; ella está a oscuras, pero la mueve poderosamente la curiosidad; él filosofa sobre el matrimonio: «¿Qué somos? ¡Pobres criaturas! Hemos de pasar por la vida como podamos, haciendo todo el bien posible a los que amamos. Piensa lo que quieras, pero amo al viejo Vernon. ¿No te estoy dando la mayor prueba de ello?». Ella no la

ve. Entonces aparece la condición. Esa y no otra. «Acepta a Vernon y te liberaré». Ella lo rechaza. Sigue el debate, con toda la oratoria de parte de Willoughby. «¿Es por su desgraciado matrimonio? Me aseguraste que no pensabas lo peor de él etc.». Ella dice que la propuesta es repulsiva. Él no distingue nada que la ofenda en una propuesta que hará feliz a su primo si ella no lo hace feliz a él. La ironía y el sarcasmo alivian las emociones de Willoughby, pero la convence de que habla sin tapujos y es generoso. Ella está confundida; habla como una doncella.

Él insiste en la primera escapada de Vernon. Ella no disfruta. La escena se cierra pidiéndole él que reflexione y recuerde la única condición de su liberación. Llaman a la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, ahora reducida a creer que él arde en deseos de ser libre, para que se entreviste con Clara. Sus tías Eleanor e Isabel la asedian. Leticia la asedia con apasionada seriedad. Persuaden a su padre para que la asedie. Willoughby y la señora Mounstuart atacan a Vernon y ahí, Willoughby prefería pensarlo, residía la principal dificultad. Pero la muchacha tiene dinero, es agradable, a Vernon le gusta, ella le tiene cariño a sus «Alpes», tienen gustos en común, a él le gusta su padre y, al final, Vernon la asedia. ¿Cederá? De Craye está ausente. No hay otro modo de evitar un matrimonio por el que siente una aversión incomprensible pero frenética. Ella está exhausta. Su padre se quedará en Patterne Hall mientras su anfitrión lo desee. Ella duda, se rinde; a pesar de una náusea causada por la alianza anterior de Vernon, cede.

Willoughby meditó todo el drama en presencia de Clara. La ayudaba a mirarla con frialdad. Mientras la llevaba a la mesa habló de Crossjay, no sin afecto, y en la mesa meditó la serie de escenas con una animación vivaz que tomaba su calor del vino y del rostro de su amigo Horacio, mientras animaba a Horacio a ser radiantemente irlandés. Rio las gracias de su camarada una o dos veces, sin haber sentido tanto afecto por él desde el día de su llegada; pero la posición de la crítica es propia de los hombres que no fluyen con la corriente y el oporto de Patterne mantuvo al doctor Middleton en una reserva benevolente cuando Willoughby decidió que algo que había dicho De Craye no era nuevo y lo acusó riendo de no haber consultado su cuaderno de anécdotas para la referencia cruzada de su última ocurrencia. «¡Tus ocurrencias son excelentes, Horacio, pero ahórranoslas!». De Craye no replicó y el doctor Middleton no intervino. Solo tenemos que aguzar el ingenio para ponerle una zancadilla a nuestro seductor charlatán cuando pensamos adecuadamente y es evidente que, si condescendemos a ello, podemos ser mejores que él. El crítico que incuba una frase ingeniosa está obligado a ser de esta opinión. A juzgar por las sonrisas de las damas, ellas también.

Poco antes de las once, el doctor Middleton tuvo una actitud espartana ante el ofrecimiento de otra botella de oporto. Habían consumido el par regular de botellas por partes iguales y el reverendo doctor y su anfitrión estaban libres para hacer una visita al salón, donde no los esperaban. Estaban examinando una pieza de la dama más anciana, un tapete de seda para sillón, que las dos más jóvenes alababan. Vernon y el coronel De Craye habían salido en busca de Crossjay, uno a la casa del señor Dale y el otro a la de los porteros. Les dijeron que salieran a pasear y fumar, pues la noche era apacible. Willoughby salió de la habitación y volvió con la llave de la puerta de Crossjay en su bolsillo. Previó que el delincuente podría serle útil.

Leticia y Clara cantaron juntas. Leticia estaba ruborizada, Clara pálida. A las once se despidieron de las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. Willoughby les dio las buenas noches a todas, contrastando mientras lo hacía el aspecto abatido de Leticia con la fría sinceridad de Clara. Adivinó que habían hablado del único asunto de interés común, Crossjay. Al despedirse de sus tías, tomó el tapete para celebrar su diligencia y gusto y, para impacientar al doctor Middleton, deseoso de irse a la cama, lo obligó a admirarlo, sosteniéndolo y desplegándolo, causando en el anciano y cortés caballero cierta confusión al pedirle algunos términos de elogio.

Antes de la medianoche la sala estaba vacía. Diez minutos después Willoughby volvió a ella y no encontró allí a la persona a la que había pedido que estuviera. Molesto por la decepción, caminó arriba y abajo y, sin darse cuenta, cogió el tapete; podría haberse preguntado a sí mismo con qué propósito: no era probable que quisiera admirar la obra de las damas en su ausencia. Sin embargo, el tacto de la suave y cálida seda era delicadamente femenino. Una mirada al reloj de la repisa le dijo que Leticia llevaba veinte minutos de retraso.

Su negligencia ponía en peligro todos sus planes y alteraba el curso de su vida. Los colores con los que la había pintado eran demasiado vivos para durar; la locura amenazaba con remitir. Era seguro que no tendría una segunda noche para el sacrifico que iba a llevar a cabo.

El reloj marcaba las doce y media. Extendió la pieza de seda sobre la otomana central, apagó las lámparas y salió de la habitación, cargando sobre Leticia la desgracia con la conciencia de merecerla.

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53 Virgilio, *Geórgicas,* 1.201-2. Meredith traduce el verso a continuación.

XL

Medianoche: sir Willoughby y Leticia, con el joven Crossjay bajo una colcha

El joven Crossjay era un glotón en vacaciones y no pensaba nunca en casa hasta que oscurecía. El final del día lo encontró a varias millas de la casa, dudando de redondear sus numerosas aventuras durmiendo en una posada, pues tenía mucho dinero y la idea de levantarse por la mañana en un lugar extraño era emocionante. Además, cuando sir Willoughby lo sacó del sueño le dijo que tenía que irse y no volver a mostrar su rostro en Patterne. Por otra parte, la señorita Middleton le había pedido que volviera. No tenía que decidir a quién obedecer: siguió a su corazón.

La cena en una posada, donde encontró una compañía que escuchó sus aventuras, lo retrasó y un breve atajo, con el que trató de ganar tiempo, le hizo extraviarse. Llegó a la casa solariega muy tarde, resuelto a enamorarse del horrible placer de una noche de descanso bajo las estrellas si fuera necesario. Pero ardía una luz en una de las ventanas traseras. Llamó y una de las criadas lo dejó pasar. Tenía un plato de sopa caliente preparado para él. Crossjay lo probó para complacerla. Su cabeza cayó sobre el plato. La criada lo puso de pie y él se apoyó sobre su hombro. El aire seco de la cocina había sido demasiado para el cansado jovencito. Mary, la criada, lo sostuvo para que caminara lo más firmemente que Crossjay pudiera y lo llevó por el pasillo lateral al vestíbulo, pidiéndole que se fuera a la cama sin hacer ruido. Crossjay entendía su situación en la casa y, aunque habría podido dormirse en las escaleras, se hizo el propósito de llegar a su habitación y alcanzó la puerta como un gato. La puerta se resistió. Se quedó paralizado y sin fuerzas enseguida. La puerta estaba cerrada. Crossjay se sintió como si estuviera en presencia de sir Willoughby. Se tambaleó y rodó por las escaleras. Una puerta se abrió arriba. Crossjay cruzó el vestíbulo hacia el salón, que estaba abierto, y se sumió en la oscuridad, enrollándose en la otomana con algo liso y cálido, suave como las manos de las damas, que le recordaba a ellas; tan delicioso que se arrebujó los pliegues y se tapó la cabeza y los talones. Mientras trataba de pensar dónde estaba, sus piernas se doblaron, los párpados se le cerraron y se encontró en medio de las aventuras del día, haciendo cosas aún más maravillosas.

Oyó su nombre; eso era seguro. Sabía que lo había oído con sus oídos mientras perseguía los sueños más dulces concedidos nunca a un mortal. No era confuso: venía de fuera y, como la señal de peligro en el hielo, con su patín avanzando cada vez más, era recurrente, y marcaba un punto en su carrera y le hacía detener la carrera; empezó a dar vueltas hasta que, de golpe, su corazón lo golpeó, se puso alerta, pensó en salir corriendo y se quedó como si estuviera muerto, palpitante, escuchando.

—¡Oh! Sir Willoughby —había dicho una voz.

Los acentos denotaban la alarma.

—¡Amiga mía! ¡Querida! —fue la respuesta.

—Vengo a hablar de Crossjay.

—¿Quiere sentarse aquí, en la otomana?

—No, no puedo esperar. Creía haber oído regresar a Crossjay. Preferiría no sentarme. ¿Puedo pedirle que lo perdone cuando llegue a casa?

—Usted, y solo usted, puede pedirlo. No se lo permito a nadie más. Mañana hablaremos de Crossjay.

—Puede estar en los campos. Estamos preocupados.

—Ese bribón sabe cuidarse de sí mismo.

—Crossjay topa continuamente con accidentes.

—Será indemnizado si el castigo es excesivo.

—Creo que debo darle las buenas noches, sir Willoughby.

—Cuando libremente y sin reservas me haya dado la mano.

Hubo dudas.

—¿Para dar las buenas noches?

—Le pido su mano.

—Buenas noches, sir Willoughby.

—No me la da. ¿Duda? ¿Aún? ¿Qué lenguaje debo usar para convencerla? Usted me conoce. ¿Quién me conoce sino usted? Siempre me ha conocido. Usted es mi hogar y mi templo. ¿Ha olvidado usted sus versos cuando llegué a la mayoría de edad?

> La estrella matutina brilla
> en la plenitud de la luz...

—¡Le ruego que no los repita! —exclamó Leticia sin aliento.

—Me los he repetido miles de veces: en India, en América, en Japón; eran como nuestra alondra inglesa cantándome.

> ¡Mi corazón rompe tu prisión
> con orgulloso vuelo!

—¡Oh! Le pido que no me obligue a escuchar ese absurdo que escribí cuando era una niña. ¡No más líneas estúpidas como esas! Si usted supiera lo que significa escribir y despreciar la propia escritura no me turbaría así. Puesto que no quiere hablar de Crossjay esta noche, permita que me retire.

—Usted me conoce y, por tanto, sabe que por norma desprecio los versos, Leticia, pero no los que usted escribió para mí. ¿Por qué los llama estúpidos? Los considero sagrados. Son algo religioso para mí, no mera poesía. Tal vez mi favorito sea el tercero...

—¡Es más de lo que puedo soportar!

—¿Hablaba en serio cuando los escribió?

—Era muy joven, entusiasta, tonta.

—Era usted y sigue siendo la imagen de la constancia para mí.

—Es un error, sir Willoughby; estoy lejos de ser la misma.

—Somos más viejos y confío en que más sabios. Lo soy, lo confieso; mucho más sabio. ¡Sabio al fin! Le ofrezco mi mano.

Leticia no respondió.

—¡Le ofrezco mi mano y mi nombre, Leticia!

No hubo respuesta.

—¿Me considera ligado por mi honor a otra?

Estaba muda.

—Soy libre. ¡Gracias al cielo! Soy libre para escoger a mi compañera, ¡a la mujer a la que siempre he amado! Libre sin reservas, le ofrezco mi mano mientras le pido la suya. ¡Usted es la dueña de Patterne Hall, mi esposa!

Ella no dijo una palabra.

—¡Querida! ¿No lo entiende? La mano que le ofrezco no está comprometida. Se la ofrezco a la dama a la que respeto por encima de todas las demás. He descubierto que no puedo amar sin respetar y, como no puedo casarme sin amar, se sigue que soy libre; soy suyo. ¿Al fin? Sus labios se mueven: dígame las palabras. *Siempre la he amado,* he dicho. Lleva usted en su seno el imán de la constancia y, a pesar de las desviaciones aparentes, le declaro que no he dejado nunca de ser sensible a su atracción. Ahora no hay impedimentos. ¡Los dos contra el mundo! Somos uno. Déjeme confesar una debilidad, perfectamente juvenil, que achacará usted a la juventud: una vez deseé absorber. Desconfié; esa fue la razón: me doy cuenta. Me enseñó usted la diferencia de una alianza con una mujer de intelecto. El orgullo que siento por usted, Leticia, me ha curado definitivamente de esa loca pasión, llamémosla un hambre insaciable. Reconozco que fue una locura de juventud. Por decirlo así, ya he hecho el viaje para volver a casa con usted —¿al fin?— y vivir nuestra valiente vida de iguales. ¡Al fin, entonces! Pero recuerde que en el hombre más joven habría tenido usted a un déspota, tal vez un déspota celoso. Los jóvenes, se lo aseguro, tiene ideas orientales sobre el amor. El amor tiene mal nombre por ellos. Nosotros, Leticia mía, no consideramos que el amor sea egoísmo. Si lo es, es la esencia de la vida. Al menos es nuestro egoísmo vuelto hermoso. Le hablo como un hombre que ha encontrado a un compatriota en un país extranjero. Me parece no haber abierto la boca durante mucho tiempo. Desde luego he corrido los cerrojos de mi corazón. Los que cantan de alegría no son incomprensibles para mí. Si no tuviera algo valioso que decir, creo que cantaría. En todos los sentidos, me reconcilia usted con los hombres y el mundo, Leticia. ¿Por qué presionarla para que hable? Seré yo el que lo haga. Igual que usted me conoce a mí, yo la conozco a usted y...

Leticia estalló:

—¡No!

—¿No la conozco? —dijo él, deliberadamente melifluo.

—Apenas.

—¿Cómo que no?

—He cambiado.

—¿En qué sentido?

—Profundamente.

—¿Más seria?

—Materialmente.

—Volverá el color, no tema; se lo prometo. Si imagina que necesita renovarse, *yo* tengo el específico,

¡yo, mi amor, yo!

—Perdóneme, ¿quiere usted decirme, sir Willoughby, si ha roto usted con la señorita Middleton?

—Quédese tranquila, mi querida Leticia. Ella es tan libre como yo. No puedo hacer más de lo que un hombre de honor debe hacer. Ella me ha liberado. Mañana o pasado se irá. Nosotros, Leticia, usted y yo, amor mío, somos pájaros hogareños. Al pájaro hogareño no le corresponde emparejarse con el ave migratoria. El pequeño cambio imperceptible al que alude no es nada. Italia la restaurará. Estoy dispuesto a apostar mi salud —que nunca ha conmovido un doctor en medicina; digo medicina adrede, pues hay doctores en teología que abatirían gigantes— a que un viaje por Italia la devolverá... A que la traeré a casa desde Italia como a una novia resplandeciente. ¿Sacude la cabeza? ¿Decepcionada? Amor mío, se lo garantizo. ¿No puedo darle color? ¡Mire! Venga a la luz, mire en el espejo.

—Puedo ruborizarme —dijo Leticia—. Supongo que se debe a la acción del corazón. He cambiado. No tengo corazón para ningún otro propósito. Soy como usted, sir Willoughby, en esto: no puedo casarme sin amar y no sé qué es el amor, salvo que se trata de un sueño vacío.

—El matrimonio, querida...

—Está usted equivocado.

—La curaré, Leticia. Míreme, soy el tomo. No es una confianza vulgar, sino convicción. ¡Yo, amor mío, yo!

—No hay cura para lo que siento, sir Willoughby.

—Ahórreme el prefijo formal, se lo ruego. Ponga su mano sobre la mía, confíe en mí. Me comprometo hasta el final. Acabaremos como empezamos. Le pido su mano, su mano en matrimonio.

—No puedo darla.

—¡Para ser mi esposa!

—Es un honor. Debo declinarlo.

—¿Se encuentra bien, Leticia? Le propongo en los términos más sencillos que puedo emplear convertirla en lady Patterne, mía.

—Me veo obligada a rehusar.

—¿Por qué? ¿Rehusar? ¿Cuál es la razón?

—Le he dicho cuál es la razón.

Dio una zancada para recobrarse.

—Sé que hay una locura que les sobreviene a las mujeres a veces. Respóndame, Leticia. Podría jurarlo por todas las evidencias que un hombre puede tener. Pero respóndame: ¿me amó una vez?

—Yo era una muchacha extremadamente boba, romántica.

—Esquiva mi pregunta: soy serio. ¡Oh!

Willoughby se alejó de ella, repudiando sonoramente la estupidez de Leticia, y volviendo a acercarse le dijo:

—¡Pero era manifiesto para todo el mundo! Era una leyenda. Amar como Leticia Dale era una frase corriente. Usted era un ejemplo, una luz para las mujeres: nadie podía compararse con usted en devoción. Usted era un camafeo precioso, mirando fijamente. Y yo era el objeto. Usted me amaba. Usted me amaba, me pertenecía, era mía, mi posesión, mi joya; yo estaba más orgulloso de su constancia que de ninguna otra cosa en la tierra. Era una parte del orden del universo para mí. Una duda al respecto habría turbado mi credo. ¡Cielos! ¿Dónde estamos? ¿No hay nada sólido en la tierra? ¡Usted me amaba!

—Era una chiquilla.

—¡Me amaba apasionadamente!

—¿Insiste una y otra vez en avergonzarme, sir Willoughby? Ya me he expuesto bastante.

—No puede borrar el pasado: está escrito, registrado. Usted me amaba con devoción. El silencio no es una escapatoria. Usted me amaba.

—Así era.

—¡Usted no me amó nunca, mujer superficial! *Así era* . ¡Cómo si pudiera cesar el amor! ¿Qué podemos contar como nuestro? ¡Apreciamos el amor de una mujer, lo guardamos celosamente, confiamos en él, soñamos con él, *ahí* está nuestra riqueza, es nuestro talismán! Y, cuando abrimos el cofre, ¡ha desaparecido! ¡Un vacío estéril! Somos más pobres que los perros. ¡Da lo mismo conservar un vino costoso en la arcilla del alfarero que el amor en el corazón de una mujer! Mujeres, ¡mujeres! ¡Oh! Todas son iguales, ¡moneda! ¡Moneda en cualquier mano! Es una ficción, una impostura. ¡No aman! Son las sombras de los hombres. Comparadas con los hombres, tienen tanto corazón como la sombra del cuerpo. ¡Leticia!

—Sir Willoughby.

—¿Rehúsa mi oferta?

—Debo hacerlo.

—¿Rehúsa aceptarme por marido?

—No puedo ser su esposa.

—¿Ha cambiado? ¿Se ha endurecido su corazón? ¿Podría casarse? ¿Hay un hombre? ¡Podría casarse con alguien! He de obtener una respuesta, estoy harto de evasivas. ¡Lo que hubiera en la mente del cielo cuando se crearon las mujeres será un enigma hasta el fin del mundo! Todo hombre bueno se ha hecho la pregunta. Tengo derecho a saber quién me ha despojado. Podemos tratarlo como queramos hasta resolverlo. Satán es una risa pintada. Digo que tengo derecho a saber quién me ha despojado. Respóndame.

—No me casaré.

—Eso no es una respuesta.

—No amo a nadie.

—Usted me amaba. ¿Calla? Pero lo ha confesado. Entonces ¡confiesa que era un amor que podía morir! ¿Es usted incapaz de darse cuenta de cuánto redunda eso en mi descrédito? Usted me amaba, ha dejado de amarme. En otras palabras, me carga a mí con la incapacidad de sostener el amor de una mujer. ¡Me acusa de inspirar una miserable pasión que no puede durar toda la vida! ¡Deja que el mundo vea que soy un hombre al que aspirar temporalmente! ¡Simplemente porque yo me encontraba en su vecindad en una época en la que una joven es impresionable! Ha hecho de mí un ejemplo público de un hombre por el que las mujeres pueden sentir un capricho, pero nada más; no puede encadenarlas, las fascina pasajeramente, se van. ¿Es justo para mí ser tomado y arrojado a su voluntad? ¡Reflexione en el escándalo! ¿Sombras? La sombra de un hombre es más fiel al menos. ¿Qué son las mujeres? ¡No hay comparación en la naturaleza que no se encumbre por encima de ellas! ¡Nadie a quien no le importen un comino! Guiado durante toda mi vida por una absoluta deferencia a su debilidad, rindiéndoles cortesía, refinamiento, soy feliz con todo lo que toco, ¡salvo que toque a las mujeres! ¿Cómo es eso? ¿Cuál es el misterio? Ha de haber una explicación monstruosa. ¿Cuál puede ser? ¡La fortuna de mi nacimiento me favorecía hasta entrar en relaciones con las mujeres! ¿Tendrá la amabilidad de explicarlo en su defensa? ¡Oh! Si las relaciones no fueran honestas sería otra cosa. *Entonces* ellas... Podría contar... Desdeño la crónica de esas victorias. ¡Es otra cosa! Pero son moscas y yo soy algo más estable. Son moscas. Yo miro más allá del día; me debo a mi linaje. Son moscas. Lo preveo, mi destino será adverso mientras no las esquive. ¡Moscas! No habiendo nacido para el día, mantengo que las mujeres son espiritualmente efímeras. Mi opinión sobre su sexo puede aplicarse directamente a usted. Usted podría alterarla o infligir a otro hombre más del mundo la vieja experiencia de amargura. Considere que está en su cabeza que mi ideal de las mujeres se trunque. Depende de usted restaurarlo. La amo. He descubierto que usted es la única mujer a la que siempre he amado. Acudo a usted, la solicito y, de repente, ¡usted ha cambiado! *He cambiado; no soy la misma* . ¿Qué quiere decir eso? *No puedo casarme; no amo a nadie.* ¡Y dice que no sabe qué es el amor, concediendo con el mismo aliento que me amó! ¿Soy yo el sueño vacío? Mi mano, mi corazón, mi fortuna, mi nombre son suyos, a sus pies: usted los aparta de una patada. Aquí estoy; usted me rechaza. Pero ¿por qué? ¿Por qué razón mortal soy distinto a mi fe en su amor? Usted me atrajo para repelerme y obtener una funesta venganza.

—Sabe que no es eso, sir Willoughby.

—¿Sospecha acaso que aún estoy atrapado y que no soy perfectamente libre de hecho y en cuanto al honor?

—No es eso.

—Dígalo; ya ve su poder. ¿Quiere que me arrodille, madam?

—¡Oh no! Mi pena sería completa.

—¿Siente pena? Entonces cree en mi afecto y lo aparta. No dudo de que, como poetisa, usted diría que el amor es eterno. Y usted me amó. Y me dice que ya no me ama. No es usted demasiado lógica, Leticia Dale.

—Las poetisas rara vez lo son. Si lo soy, pues apenas pretendo serlo por escribir estúpidos versos. Ya he pasado por ese engaño, como por el resto.

—No eche a perder aquellos días queridos, Leticia. Los veo ahora, cuando cabalgaba alrededor de su casa y usted estaba junto a la ventana, con la pluma en la mano, con el pelo sobre la frente. Romántico, sí; no estúpido. ¿Por qué habría de ser estúpida al pensar en mí? Un día encargaré a un artista que pinte para mí ese retrato suyo basándose en mi descripción. Recuerdo cuando por primera vez nos susurramos... Recuerdo que usted temblaba. Usted ha olvidado; yo recuerdo. Recuerdo nuestro encuentro en el parque, camino de la iglesia. Recuerdo la mañana celestial a la vuelta de mis viajes y a la misma Leticia saliéndome al paso, firme e inmutable. ¿Podría olvidarlo alguna vez? Son escenas inerradicables, imágenes de mi juventud entreveradas en mí. Podría decir que, cuanto más me alejo de ellas, más se adentran en mí. Dígame, Leticia, ¿no había una profecía de su padre sobre nosotros? Creo haberla oído. Había una.

—Era un inválido. La gente mayor alimenta ilusiones.

—Pregúntese, Leticia, cuál es el obstáculo al cumplimiento de su predicción. ¡La verdad, si la verdad se ha visto sobre la tierra! Usted no ha cambiado tanto como para *no* sentir placer en gratificarme. Iré a verlo

mañana por la mañana con las primeras luces.

—Me obligará a seguirle y desengañarlo.

—Hágalo y denunciaré un afecto indigno que le avergüenza confesar.

—Sería ocioso, aunque vil.

—¡Prueba del amor, entonces! Por nadie más lo haría y nadie salvo usted se atrevería a acusarme de vileza.

—Sir Willoughby, deje morir en paz a mi padre.

—Él y yo juntos lograremos persuadirla.

—Me hace pensar que usted necesita una mujer a toda costa.

—A usted, Leticia, a usted.

—Estoy cansada —dijo Leticia—. Es tarde. Preferiría no oír nada más. Siento haberle causado dolor. Supongo que ha hablado usted con candor. No defiendo a mi sexo ni a mí misma. Solo puedo decir que soy una mujer tan buena como muerta: feliz si me hacen feliz a mi manera, pero tan poco viva que no puede ser de otra manera. En cuanto al amor, agradezco haber roto un hechizo. Usted piensa en una mujer más joven; yo no lo soy; carezco de ambición y de calidez. Mi plegaria más insistente es la de flotar en la corriente, un deseo puramente físico de vida; no tengo fuerzas para nadar. Una mujer así no es esposa para usted, sir Willoughby. Buenas noches.

—Una última palabra. Sopéselo. No exprese un pesar convencional. ¿Rehúsa definitivamente?

—Definitivamente.

—¿Rehúsa?

—Sí.

—¡He sacrificado mi orgullo por nada! ¿Rehúsa?

—Sí.

—¡Humillado! ¡Y esa es la respuesta! ¿Rehúsa de verdad?

—De verdad.

—Buenas noches, Leticia Dale.

La dejó pasar.

—Buenas noches, sir Willoughby.

—Estoy en su poder —dijo con una voz de súplica y de amenaza al mismo tiempo que fue para ella como un clavo. Leticia se volvió y respondió:

—No lo traicionaré.

—¿Puedo confiar en usted?

—Me iré a casa mañana antes del desayuno.

—Permítame que la acompañe arriba.

—Si usted quiere, pero no veré a nadie esta noche ni mañana.

—Es por tener el privilegio de verla por última vez.

Se fueron.

El joven Crossjay oía el tamborileo de su cabeza.

En alguna parte dentro o por encima de la cavidad un tamborilero golpeaba con estruendo.

La puerta del laboratorio de sir Willoughby se cerró de golpe.

Crossjay se levantó de la otomana. Se acercó a la puerta del salón, que no estaba cerrada, y miró furtivamente. Nunca había estado tan despierto un muchacho. Su objetivo era salir de la casa y adentrarse en la noche, evitando todo lo humano, pues poseía información de un carácter que sabía que era de la naturaleza de la pólvora y temía que estallara. Cruzó el vestíbulo. En el pasillo hacia la cocina tropezó con el coronel De Craye.

—Así que estás aquí —dijo el coronel—. Te estaba buscando.

Crossjay le contó que la puerta de su dormitorio estaba cerrada y que la llave había desaparecido. Sir Willoughby estaba en el laboratorio.

El coronel De Craye se llevó al muchacho a su dormitorio, donde Crossjay se tumbó sobre un sofá, cómodamente cubierto y apoyado en un voluminoso almohadón, pero estaba inquieto; quería hablar, gritar, y se dio la vuelta sobre su costado izquierdo y luego sobre el derecho, sin saber qué pensar, salvo que traicionaban a su adorada señorita Middleton.

—Vaya, muchacho, no eres un buen soldado —le dijo el coronel, atribuyendo su inquietud a la incomodidad material del sofá, y Crossjay tuvo que tragarse la mofa, amarga como era. Una oscura sensación de indecencia respecto a descargar su abotagada cabeza en el asunto de la señorita Middleton con el coronel De Craye lo refrenó de defenderse y no dejó de dar vueltas hasta el amanecer. A una hora temprana, mientras su hospitalario amigo, que parecía encantador de perfil, con medio pecho y media cabeza fuera de las sábanas, seguía durmiendo, Crossjay se levantó y salió.

—Dice que no soy un buen soldado y un par de horas en la cama son suficientes para mí —pensó orgullosamente el muchacho, aspirando el aire renovado con el joven sol en los campos. Una mirada atrás a Patterne Hall lo hizo desfallecer, pues no sabía qué hacer y era inmoderadamente combustible, estaba demasiado lleno de conocimiento para contenerse, celosamente excitado a causa de su querida señorita Middleton para guardar silencio durante muchas horas del día.

XLI

El reverendo doctor Middleton, Clara y sir Willoughby

MIENTRAS el joven Crossjay bajaba por las escaleras, Leticia estaba en la habitación de Clara, especulando sobre los diversos errores que podría haber cometido aquella joven maltratada. Clara escuchó ansiosamente una vez que Leticia se hubo ido hasta que oyó la voz de sir Willoughby. En cierto modo la satisfizo que el muchacho no estuviera en la casa.

Esperaba a que la señorita Dale volviera; sin vestirse, se metió en la cama e intentó dormir. Estaba cansada de esforzarse. Extraños pensamientos para una joven cruzaron por su cabeza: como que si era posible que el sentido del deber contrarrestara el disgusto y si se podía vivir al margen de las admiraciones y aversiones. Clara reconocía la fortaleza singular de sir Willoughby en agotarse: se preguntó qué había ganado luchando; cada uno de sus esfuerzos parecía extender la fuerza de su espíritu y la volvía menos capaz de obtener una visión despejada de sus perspectivas, como si se hubiera hundido profundamente, lo contrario de su intención de hacer que cada paso confirmara su libertad. Mirando atrás, se maravilló de las cosas que había hecho. Mirando alrededor, ¡parecían ineficaces! Aún le quedaba la gran escena de rebelión con su padre.

Anticiparse a ella era la causa de su extremado desaliento. Su padre no le había vuelto a hablar desde que fue consciente de su intento de huida, pero la escena era inminente; además del deseo de no afligirlo, y de escapar ella misma a la aflicción, la infelicidad peculiar de la muchacha residía en su conocimiento de que se habían alienado y estaban en posiciones enfrentadas debido a una de las debilidades masculinas más desconcertantes, que ella no podía señalar, en la que no se atrevía a pensar y a la que no daba nombre en sus meditaciones. Pensando en otros asuntos, se permitió exclamar: «¡El vino, el vino!», renovando el asombro por lo que podía haber en el vino que atrapaba a ancianos venerables y ofuscaba su juicio. Era demasiado joven para darse cuenta de que, estando equivocada, daba toda la importancia a los cordiales lapsos en la apreciación que un venerable caballero tenía de sus deberes. ¿Por qué debía renunciar a un vino inestimable para gratificar los caprichos de una chiquilla fantástica, culpable de tratar de romper la confianza? El doctor Middleton insistía en esas palabras. La falta de Clara era grave. Sin duda el vino la coloreaba para él, como una gota o dos hacen en cualquier copa; pero su falta era grave.

Clara era demasiado joven para esas consideraciones. Estaba dispuesta a hablar por extenso de la gravedad de su falta, en la medida en que la humillación coadyudara a desenredarla: su naturaleza atrapada no le permitía reflexionar más allá. No se había dado cuenta con precisión, tal vez por la razón de que Willoughby no había resultado conmovedor en sus súplicas; pero, admitiendo el cargo de rebeldía, había llegado a apaciguar su conciencia con el supuesto de que debía darse cuenta de ello, lamentarlo y arrepentirse poco a poco. ¿Renunciando al matrimonio por completo? ¡Qué pena tan leve!

Por la mañana, fue a la habitación de Leticia, llamó y no obtuvo respuesta.

En el desayuno le informaron de la partida de la señorita Dale. Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel temían que fuera una urgencia en su casa. Nadie había visto a Vernon y Clara le pidió al coronel De Craye que fuera a la casita de campo en busca de noticias de Crossjay. El coronel aceptó la comisión, simplemente por obedecer y estar a su servicio; sin embargo, le aseguró que no era necesario preocuparse por el muchacho. Le habría contado más si el doctor Middleton no se la hubiera llevado consigo.

Sir Willoughby señaló un lapso de diez minutos en su reloj. Sus excelentes tías habían aventurado un comentario sobre su apariencia que lo asustó por miedo a ser él la persona que hubiera delatado su asombrosa turbación. Consideraba su conducta un acto de locura y la de Leticia la de una loca, ¡felizmente loca! ¡Mucho, en realidad! Su rechazo de la propuesta ridículamente generosa parecía mostrar una mano que hubiera intervenido a su favor y la hubiera turbado en el momento adecuado. Confiaba completamente en su discreción, pero Leticia era una criatura miserable que había perdido la última oportunidad que la providencia le ofrecía y le proporcionaba a él una muestra señalada de la mediocridad del amor de una mujer.

El tiempo volaba. La señora Mountstuart llegaría enseguida. No podría enfrenarse a ella sin un propósito en mente; carecía de armadura sin un plan; se estrujó el cerebro sin conseguir otra cosa que vapores fantasmales. Su infernal «¡Dos veces!» cesaría; ahora se aplicaría a Leticia: sería un eco de lady Busshe. Si todos estuvieran en el secreto, *¡Tres veces* plantado! Se convertiría en el rugido universal. Eso, reflexionó amargamente, de un hombre a quien nada salvo el deber con su linaje había impedido ser el más perverso de su clase con las mujeres. ¡Esa es nuestra recompensa por la rectitud!

A los quince minutos según su reloj, golpeó con los nudillos en la puerta de la biblioteca. El doctor

Middleton la abrió.

—¿Está desocupado, señor?

—El sermón versa sobre el párrafo adecuado para despertar al clérigo —replicó el reverendo doctor.

Clara estaba llorando.

Sir Willoughby se acercó a ella solícitamente.

La cabellera plateada del doctor Middleton testificaba la vehemencia de su sermón y Willoughby dijo:

—Espero, señor, que no habrá hecho demasiado de una bagatela.

—Creo, señor, que ha surtido efecto y ese era el punto en consideración.

—¡Clara, querida Clara! —Willoughby la rozó.

—Puedo informarle de que se arrepiente sinceramente de su conducta —dijo el doctor Middleton.

—¡Amor mío! —susurró Willoughby—. Ha sido un malentendido. Lamento descubrir que soy culpable. Acepto la culpa, toda la culpa. Te ruego que no llores. Haz el favor de mirarme. No habría debido someterte a un interrogatorio.

—La culpa no es tuya —dijo Clara entre sollozos.

—Sin duda la culpa no es de Willoughby. No fue él quien se entregó a una huida errante en flagrante ruptura del deber y el decoro ni quien infligió un catarro a un hermano en el oficio y el clero —dijo su padre.

—El clérigo, señor, ha dicho amén —observó Willoughby.

—Y nadie es más feliz de oír una expresión que ha trabajado con el sudor de su frente que el pastor, puedo asegurárselo —refunfuñó mansamente el doctor Middleton.

—Tengo algunas nociones del problema de Abraham. Un sermón de ese tipo es toda una inmolación del padre, pase lo que pase con el hijo.

Willoughby tranquilizaba a Clara.

—Habría querido estar aquí para compartirlo. Le habría ahorrado algunas lágrimas. Puedo haber sido impetuoso en nuestras pequeñas disensiones. Reconozco que lo he sido. Mi temperamento es a menudo irascible.

—¡Y el mío! —exclamó el doctor Middleton—. Sin embargo, no soy consciente de haber sido el peor de los maridos por eso. Tampoco comprendo del todo que un temperamento justamente excitable haya de suplicar para mitigar el intento de una ultrajante traición de la confianza.

—Se acabó el sermón, señor.

—¡Reverberaciones! —El reverendo doctor agitó su brazo y se aplacó—. Tómelo por un trueno que se oye remotamente.

—Tu mano, amor mío —murmuró Willoughby.

La mano no fue tendida.

El doctor Middleton observó el hecho. Fue hasta la ventana y, dándose cuenta de que la pareja seguía en la misma posición al levantar el rostro, tosió como advertencia.

—¡Es cruel! —dijo Clara.

—¿Que el dueño de tu mano te la haya pedido? —preguntó su padre.

Clara se refugió en un acceso de lágrimas.

Willoughby se inclinó sobre ella, mudo.

—¡Es una escena apenas concebible como obligación de un padre una vez en un lustro para repetirla en media hora! —gritó su padre.

Clara levanto los hombros y se agitó; los dejó caer e inclinó la cabeza.

—¡Querida! Tu mano —musitó Willoughby.

La mano cedió. Era como un carámbano de un repentino deshielo.

Willoughby se estremeció hasta la médula.

El doctor Middleton caminaba arriba y debajo de la estancia con los brazos cruzados a la espalda. El silencio de los jóvenes parecía denunciar su presencia.

Dijo cordialmente:

—El viejo invierno cede a la floración. *Jam ver egelidos refert tepores* [54] . Se marcha la furia equinoccial. Saldré un rato.

Clara y Willoughby alzaron a la vez sus rostros con expresiones opuestas.

—¿Hija mía?

Su padre estaba a su lado, apoyando suavemente la mano sobre ella.

—Sí, papá, iré enseguida —respondió Clara a su defensa por el peso de su vocabulario y sonrió.

—No, señor, le pido que se quede —dijo Willoughby—. Está helada.

Clara no lo negó.

Willoughby lo hizo enfáticamente.

¿Cuál de los dos parecía más enamorado? El doctor Middleton habría supuesto en ese momento que su hija.

Clara dijo:

—¿Estarás en el césped, papá?

Willoughby se interpuso:

—Quédese, señor; denos su bendición.

—La tienen.

El doctor Middleton se apresuró a esbozar la ceremonia paternal.

—Unos minutos, papá —dijo Clara.

—¿Señalara ella el día? —le salió a Willoughby.

—¡No puedo! —gritó Clara.

—El día es importante —dijo su padre—, pero me doy cuenta de que la decisión es de la mayor importancia ahora. Prepare primero su pieza de artillería, amigo mío.

—La decisión está tomada, señor.

—Entonces me apartaré de la línea de tiro. Señale el día que le guste.

Clara refrenó una exclamación impetuosa. No había que detener a su padre.

Su astuta comprensión de sí misma aguzaba a Willoughby tanto como lo mortificaba y aterrorizaba. Sabía cómo se quedaría en un instante cuando el doctor Middleton se fuera. Su padre era el tribunal que ella temía y los asuntos debían zanjarse y hacerse irrevocables mientras estuviera con ellos. Para pinchar la sangre de la muchacha, la llamaba «Cariño» y la rodeaba, ensombreciendo el saludo.

Clara se dispuso a ceder al ver que su padre lo tomaba como una señal para su inmediato retiro.

Willoughby lo detuvo antes de que llegara a la puerta.

—Óiganos, señor. No se vaya. Quédese, se lo ruego. Temo no haber logrado una reconciliación completa.

—Si esa es tu opinión —dijo Clara—, es una buena razón para no turbar a mi padre.

—Doctor Middleton, amo a su hija. La cortejé y la obtuve; tengo su consentimiento para nuestra unión y yo era el hombre más feliz de la humanidad. En cierto modo, desde que llegó a mi casa, no sé cómo —no me lo ha dicho o no puede—, la he ofendido. Se puede ser inocente y ofender. Nunca he pretendido ser impecable, lo cual equivale a admitir que puedo naturalmente ofender. Lo que le pido es una explicación o el perdón. No obtengo nada. Si nuestras posiciones se invirtieran, ¡oh!, no por una ofensa real —ni por la peor que pueda imaginarse—, no creo, espero que no, que estuviera tentado de disolver nuestro compromiso. Amar es amar para mí; un compromiso, un vínculo solemne. Con todos mis errores tengo el mérito de la profunda fidelidad ¡para risa del mundo! Confieso una multitud de errores; tengo ese único mérito y me temo que no soy más estimable a ojos de su hija por ello. Con palabras sencillas, no dudo de ser un estúpido entre los hombres, de la descripción del perro humano conocido como fiel y cuyo destino es el de la tribu. Un hombre que grita cuando lo hieren es absurdo y no pido simpatía. Llámeme desgraciado. Pero aborrezco que se traicione la confianza. Una promesa rota me resulta odiosa. La considero una forma de suicidio. Hay principios por los que los hombres civilizados deben luchar. Nuestra fábrica social se basa en ellos. Si mi palabra me representa, que represente la suya a otros. Si no es así, el mundo es más o menos un carnaval de falsificaciones. ¡Ah Clara, amor mío! Tú tienes principios: los has heredado, has sido adoctrinada en ellos; si, en mi ignorancia, te he ofendido con una penitencia pasada, que tú, entre todas las mujeres... ¡Sin poder nombrar mi pecado! No solo por lo que he perdido por ello, sino en abstracto, judicialmente, aparte del sentimiento de interés personal, del pesar, la pena y la posibilidad de tener que soportar lo que ninguna tentación me induciría a cometer... Judicialmente... Me temo, señor, que soy un pobre orador...

—La situación, señor, no pide un Cicerón: siga —dijo el doctor Middleton, insistiendo en su aquiescencia ante las cosas que se habían dicho.

—Judicialmente, me atrevo a decir, aunque pueda parecer presunción en quien sufre tanto, aborrezco que se traicione la confianza.

El doctor Middleton asintió a la frase que había anticipado.

—Y —dijo— personalmente, y en este momento, aborrezco que se traicione la confianza. ¿Judicialmente? Judicialmente para examinar, judicialmente para condenar, pero ¿detesta la mentalidad judicial? Creo, señor, que no estamos ante un tribunal cuando decimos que la aborrecemos: nos han derribado. Sin embargo, nuestro aborrecimiento de la mala conducta es firme. Puede usted dar a entender que es impersonal, lo que basta para la exposición de sus sentimientos.

Miró al caballero frunciendo el ceño y siguió:

—Ella lo ha hecho, Willoughby; lo ha hecho en sencillo sajón y en incondicional olímpico. Creo que no hay necesidad de volver a ello.

—Perdóneme, señor, pero no he sido perdonado.

—Tendrán que balbucear el resto los dos. Me encuentro aquí como un pavo entre dos palomas.

—Déjanos, padre —dijo Clara.

—Primero una nuestras manos y déjeme darle ese título, señor.

—Dale a este buen hombre tu mano, hija mía; con fuerza, desde el hombro, como un valiente boxeador. El humor es un enamorado. Pide lo suyo.

—Es más de lo que puedo hacer, padre.

—¿Cómo, es más de lo que puedes hacer? Estás comprometida con él, una mujer comprometida.

—No quiero casarme.

—La defensa es inadecuada.

—Soy indigna...

—¡Boberías! ¡Boberías!

—Le pido que me libere.

—¡Locura!

—No tengo amor que darle.

—¿Has vuelto a la cuna, Clara Middleton?

—¡Oh! Déjanos, querido padre.

—¡Mi ofensa, Clara, mi ofensa! ¿Cuál es? ¿Dirás cuál es?

—Padre, ¿nos dejas? Hablaremos mejor juntos...

—Hemos hablado a menudo, Clara —siguió Willoughby—. ¿Con qué resultado? Que me amabas, que has dejado de amarme; que tu corazón era mío, que lo has retirado, que lo has arrancado de mí; que me pides que consienta en un sacrificio que involucra mi reputación, mi vida. ¿Qué he hecho? Soy el mismo, inmutable. Te amaba y te amo: mi corazón era tuyo y lo es y siempre será tuyo. Eres mi prometida, es decir, mi esposa. ¿Qué he hecho?

—Es inútil —suspiró Clara.

—No es inútil, chiquilla, que informes a este caballero, tu prometido, del motivo de la objeción que has concebido contra él.

—No puedo decirlo.

—¿Lo conoces?

—Si pudiera decirlo, podría esperar superarlo.

El doctor Middleton se dirigió a sir Willoughby.

—Creo verdaderamente que estamos llevando a la muchacha a diseccionar un capricho. Se han visto esas cosas muchas veces en la gente joven, pero como no tienen órganos ni arterias, ni cerebros, ni membranas, la disección es una práctica infructuosa. Su pregunta es natural en un enamorado, cuya pasión por entrar en relaciones con el sexo suele ser proporcional a su ignorancia de la materia de la que están hechas las mujeres. A cierta edad trafican con caprichos, que son, supongo, el espíritu de la histeria y resultan preferibles, sin duda, en la medida en que no van demasiado lejos. No faltan los ejemplos que prueban que una iniciativa veleidosa por parte del varón es un correctivo provechoso. En ese caso, quitaríamos el tejado a la casa y la muchacha estaría a sus pies. ¡Ja!

—Despréciame, padre. Es un castigo por haberme considerado superior a cualquier mujer —dijo Clara.

—Dale la mano, querida, puesto que te ofrece una reconciliación formal, y no me sorprenderé.

—¡Padre! He dicho que no... He dicho que no puedo...

—¡Por misericordia! ¿Qué? ¡Da la razón! ¡Una palabra!

—No te enfades conmigo, padre. Le deseo felicidad a Willoughby. No puedo casarme con él. No lo amo.

—Recordarás que me informaste hace poco que lo amabas.

—Era ignorante... No me conocía a mí misma. Deseo que sea feliz.

—Le niegas la felicidad que le deseas.

—Que me casara con él no lo haría feliz.

—¡Oh! —estalló Willoughby.

—Ya lo has oído. Rechaza tu predicción, Clara Middleton.

Clara se llevó las manos a la garganta.

—¡Desgraciados, desgraciados, ambos!

—¿Y no tienes una palabra contra él, miserable muchacha?

—¡Miserable! Lo soy.

—Es el grito de un animal.

—Sí, padre.

—¿Te sientes un animal? Tu conducta es de esa clase. ¿No tienes nada que decir?

—Contra mí misma, no contra él.

—Y yo, hablando tú tan generosamente, ¿voy a renunciar a ti? ¿Abandonarte? —gritó Willoughby—.

¡Ah amor mío! Clara, imponme lo que quieras, no eso. Es demasiado para un hombre. Juro que está más allá de mis fuerzas.

—Siga, insista en esa dirección: es la clave —dijo el doctor Middleton, despidiéndose.

Willoughby lo siguió y lo detuvo de un salto.

—Defiéndame, señor; usted es todopoderoso. Haga que sea mía, será feliz o moriré por ello. Pende sobre mi cabeza. ¡Imposible! No puedo perderla. ¿Perderte, amor mío? Me despojaría de toda bendición de cuerpo y alma. Sería negarme la posesión de la gracia, de la belleza, del ingenio, todos los encantos incomparables de la vivacidad de una mujer y quedarme en el desierto. Eres mi compañera, la suma de todo cuanto llamo mío. Clara, sería menos que un hombre si aceptara esa pérdida. ¿Consentirla? Pero ¡te amo! ¡Te adoro! ¿Cómo puedo consentir perderte?

Vio los ojos de la joven desesperadamente taimada mirar hacia otro lado. El doctor Middleton se acercaba cada vez más a la puerta.

—¿Me odias? —La voz de Willoughby se apagó.

—¡Si tuviera que odiarte! —murmuró ella.

—¿Odiar a tu marido?

—No puedo prometerlo —murmuró Clara suavemente en su astucia.

—¿Odio? —gritó Willoughby, y el doctor Middleton se detuvo en su paseo y levantó la cabeza—. ¿Odio a tu marido? ¿Al hombre al que has jurado amar y honrar? ¡Oh no! Una vez mía, no hay que temerlo. Confío en mi conocimiento de tu naturaleza, confío en tu sangre, confío en tu educación. Si no tuviera nada más que me inspirase confianza, podría confiar en tus ojos. Clara, acepta la confesión: preferiría ser odiado a perderte. Si te pierdo, estarás en otro mundo, fuera de este que me atrapa en su frío mortal; pero, si me odias, estaremos juntos, seguiremos estando juntos. ¡Cualquier alianza, cualquiera, antes que la separación!

Clara escuchó con un oído crítico. Su lenguaje y su tono eran nuevos y, comprendiendo que, en parte, se dirigían a su padre, cuya frase «Traicionar la confianza» había usado con tanta habilidad, el desprecio del actor urgió el extremo error de que ella dijera, con frialdad, pero dijera: «No me habías hablado antes así».

—Al fin —observó su padre, resumiendo la situación para zanjarla con ese breve discurso— te habla de ese modo ahora y tú estás bajo mi orden de que le des la mano como símbolo de unión o para afirmar tus objeciones a ese curso. Él, como reconoces, está al final y ahí, en ausencia del por qué no, has de unirte a él.

A Clara le daba vueltas la cabeza. Había sido flagelada y había quedado debilitada antes de la entrada de Willoughby. Le faltó el lenguaje para expresar su repulsión peculiar. Formó las palabras y se dio cuenta de que no resistirían la réplica de su padre. Se dio cuenta también de que Willoughby estaba preparado, con su agonía de súplica, como ella con la suya. Si ella podía recurrir a las lágrimas, él tenía gestos, igual de elocuentes, y un grito de aborrecimiento de la unión daría como resultado un torrente de réplica del amor del hombre. ¿Qué podía decir? ¿Es Willoughby un Egoísta? El epíteto no tiene sentido en esa escena. *¡Inventa!,* aulló el instinto de cien voces del disgusto en ella y, a solas con su padre, a solas con Willoughby, podría haber inventado el equivalente para hacer justicia a su corazón por la ofensa que le causaba ser incapaz de decir la verdadera e inmensa objeción, pero la pareja presente la paralizaba. Dramatizaba cada ocurrencia, con réplicas aplastantes. La actividad de su mente gozaba dándoles una voz, pero no se la daba a sí misma. Siguió entonces la consecuencia inevitable de la incapacidad para hablar al dictado urgente del corazón: el corazón y la mente se dividieron. Uno latía ardientemente, la otra se elevaba y, mentalmente, mientras el corazón desarticulado clamaba, Clara respondió a todo cuanto imaginaba que aquellos hombres dirían. Dejó caer veneno para aplacar los reproches de su corazón, exigiéndose a sí misma el recuerdo de sus fatales posposiciones para preservar una apariencia de coherencia ante su padre, llamando hipócrita a su corazón, preguntándose qué era ella, quién la amaba. Abatiendo así el corazón, completó el daño con una aguda perspectiva del fundamento de la defensa que su padre hacía de Willoughby y, de una manera aún más lamentable, se preguntó cuánto valía ella, si su padre seguía respetándola.

La razón, por otra parte, encontraba aliento en su mejor naturaleza para defender su caso contra ella: ella se aferró a su respeto por él y se sintió sofocada; oyó conscientemente el eco de Willoughby, que doblaba su horror con la conciencia, al clamar contra un mundo en el que los sentimientos más sagrados están sujetos a tales lapsos. Dobló su horror para que pudiera hacerse eco del hombre, pero eso probó que ella no era mejor que él: solo algunos años más joven. Pronto pasarían esos años, tras los cuales él y ella serían de una misma pauta. No era amada: no hacía daño a nadie manteniendo su palabra con ese hombre; lo había prometido y sería traicionar la confianza no mantenerla. Nadie la amaba. ¡Ahí estaba la cualidad del amor de su padre! Hacerlo feliz era ahora el principal propósito de Clara, habiendo sepultado decentemente su propia felicidad, y en ello él era feliz: ¿por qué habría de ser ella la causa de que tuviera que irse y perdiera el pobre placer del que tanto disfrutaba?

La idea de su devoción era aduladora para su debilidad. Dejó ver señales de duda y, al dudar, miró a Willoughby, pensando (tan contrario era a su naturaleza rendirse ante él) que no habría sido tan difícil con un

hombre desfavorecido. Con alguien horriblemente feo habría sido una horrible exaltación arrojar su juventud y dar el salto diabólico.

Por desgracia para sir Willoughby, él mismo tenía razones para ser impaciente y, al verla deliberar, al ver su apresurada mirada a su hermosa figura, la opinión que tenía de sí mismo se combinó con lo que recordaba de una máxima en particular del Gran Libro para reafirmarlo en que la resistencia de Clara había acabado: debido sobre todo, suponía, a sus perfecciones físicas.

Con frecuencia, de hecho, en la lucha entre los caballeros y las damas, las máximas del Libro han estimulado al asaltante a la victoria. Están teñidas de la sangre de las víctimas. Oírlas es oír un cuerno que anuncia la muerte: ha soplado miles de veces. Es bueno recordar cuántas veces ha sucedido cuando, en beneficio de una futura lady Vauban que estimule su ingenio para reunir máximas que inspiren la defensa, haya de recordarse la circunstancia de un fracaso.

Willoughby no podía esperar a que se derritiera la nieve. Veía el proceso de disolución y admirándola sinceramente y deseándola, este malhadado caballero de precipitó y, al hacerlo, se detuvo.

De donde podemos extraer otra máxima en palabras como estas: Asegúrate de que tu aliento no se convierta en escarcha.

—¡Mía! ¡Es mía! —gritó—. ¡Mía una vez más! ¡Mía del todo! ¡Mía eternamente! —y siguió con su voraces exclamaciones mientras ella, con menos decisión, retrocedía. Retrocedió como las jóvenes hacen siempre, dos o tres pasos, y él no se dio cuenta de que se había convertido en una Diana furiosa, toda flechas: su condición de doncella le agradaba. Cogiendo una hermosa mano, permitió que ella se alejara de su abrazo y gritó:

—¡Ni una sílaba de lo que he de sufrir! No tienes que explicarlo, Clara. Te estudiaré con más diligencia para que me guíes, querida. Si vuelvo a ofenderte, a mi esposa no le será difícil decir lo que mi prometida calla; no pregunto por qué: tal vez no sepa sopesar el efecto de su reticencia, no en esa época en que ella era más joven y menos experimentada para estimar que un compromiso es sagrado. Ya ha pasado, somos uno, mi querido señor y padre. Puede dejarnos ahora.

—Me regocija profundamente oír que puedo —dijo el doctor Middleton.

Clara retorció la mano cautiva.

—No, papá, quédate. Es un error, un error. No debes dejarme. No me consideres profunda, eternamente perteneciente a nadie más que a ti. Nadie más podrá decir que soy suya.

—¿Eres como las arenas movedizas, Clara Middleton, que nada puede edificarse sobre ti? ¿Dónde lleva una cabeza veleidosa y una voluntad cambiante a una muchacha?

—Clara y yo, señor —dijo Willoughby.

—También usted —dijo el doctor, dándose la vuelta.

—Aún no, papá —le soltó Clara.

—¡Tú, tú, tú, eras tú la que anhelaba estar a solas con Willoughby! —gritó su padre—. Y aquí estamos, dándoles vueltas al punto de partida, con la solitaria diferencia de que ahora no quieres estar a solas con Willoughby. Primero me piden que me vaya, luego me hacen volver y, a juzgar por el collar y el faldón, sospecho que eres una joven que lleva el temperamento hecho jirones de un ángel para determinar con cuál de las dos mareas que te llevan a él y te alejan te pondrás a navegar. ¿Cuál es tu opinión?

Clara se alisó la frente.

—Querría complacerte, papá.

—Te pido que complazcas al caballero que es tu marido designado.

—Estoy ansiosa por cumplir mi deber.

—Esa es una base satisfactoria para usted, Willoughby, ¡teniendo en cuenta a las muchachas!

—Déjeme, señor, simplemente pedirle que tenga su mano en la mía delante de usted.

—¿Por qué no, Clara?

—¿Por qué una ceremonia vacía, papá?

—La implicación es que está preparada para la importante, amigo Willoughby.

—Su mano, señor; la confirmación de su mano en la mía bajo sus ojos: después de todo lo que he sufrido, exijo, creo que lo exijo razonablemente, la restauración de la confianza.

—Muy razonablemente, lo que no quiere decir necesariamente, pero, añadiré, justificadamente y tal vez sagazmente, tratando con algo tan volátil.

—Aquí —dijo Willoughby— está mi mano.

Clara retrocedió.

Willoughby se adelantó. Su padre frunció el ceño. Clara sacó las manos de los codos encogidos, arrojó una mirada de repulsión a su perseguidor y a su padre y gritó:

—¡Consideradlo mi estado de ánimo! Soy volátil, caprichosa, ligera, muy boba. Pero ya veis que le doy un significado real y siento que es vinculante: no puedo pensar en una ceremonia vacía ni siquiera ante vo-

sotros. Sí, sed un poco considerados con vuestra veleidosa muchacha. Se encontrará mejor dentro de unas horas. Ahorradme este momento; he de concentrarme en mí misma. Pensaba que era libre; pensaba que no me presionaría. Si doy mi mano ahora, apresuradamente, sé que me arrepentiré. ¡Esa imagen mía! Pero, papá, trato de estar por encima de eso y si me voy y camino por mí misma, encontraré la calma para saber dónde está mi deber...

—¿En qué dirección caminarás? —dijo Willoughby.

—La sabiduría no tiene un camino particular —dijo el doctor Willoughby.

—Temo, señor, el que lleva a la estación de ferrocarril.

—¡Con justicia! —suspiró el doctor Middleton a su hija.

Clara se ruborizó profundamente, pero estaba más allá de la ira y estaba más bien agradecida por una ofensa proveniente de Willoughby.

—Prometo no abandonar sus tierras, papá.

—Hija mía, has amenazado con romper tus promesas.

—¡Oh! —gimió Clara—. Pero te he hecho este voto a ti.

—¿Por qué no hacerme el voto en este momento, para contento de este caballero, de que será tu esposo en un periodo determinado?

—Vendré voluntariamente. Ardo en deseos de estar sola.

—¡La perderé! —exclamó Willoughby terriblemente en serio.

—¿Cómo? —dijo el doctor Middleton—. La tengo, señor, si me hace el favor de mantener el aplazamiento. Vendrás voluntariamente dentro de una hora, Clara, y le darás tu mano o aportarás razones, y habrán de ser buenas, para retirársela.

—Sí, papá.

—¿Lo harás?

—Lo haré.

—Recuerda, he dicho *razones* .

—Razones, papá. Si no tengo...

—Si no tienes ninguna que me satisfaga, implícita, instantánea y cordialmente obedecerás mis órdenes.

—Obedeceré.

—¿Qué más quiere? —El doctor Middleton se inclinó triunfalmente ante sir Willoughby.

—Ella...

—¡Señor! ¡Señor!

—Es su hija, señor. Estoy satisfecho.

—Tal vez haya luchado con su compromiso, como los aborígenes de una tierra recién descubierta por un puñado de colonos aventureros batallan contra los atuendos que les impone nuestra considerada civilización, regocijados en última instancia con el bicornio abollado y los pantalones que no les llegan a las pantorrillas. Pero ella no romperá su compromiso, señor, y anticipamos que, al moderar la condición salvaje de una joven nativa, adoptará a su debido momento, a la manera de mi comparación, un orgullo parecido por su fortuna.

Willoughby no tenía tiempo para sondear la profundidad del cumplido del doctor Middleton. Había visto a Clara deslizarse fuera de la habitación mientras lo decía y volvió a apoderarse de él el miedo a que, no habiéndola ganado, la hubiera perdido.

—Se ha ido.

Su padre advirtió la ausencia.

—No pierde tiempo en la misión de procurar ese producto sorprendente de una tierra superficial: sus razones, si ese es el objeto de su búsqueda. Pero no: significa que piensa que tiene necesidad de compostura; nada más. A nadie le gusta que le hagan cambiar de opinión; preferimos cambiar nosotros y, tratándose de algo que hay que hacer, estipulamos que el acto será nuestro: las muchachas y los demás. Una hora después: a ella le parecerá obra suya. Por fortuna, Willoughby, no cenaremos fuera esta noche.

—No, señor.

—Puede atribuirse a una sensación de merecimiento, pero me reconozco culpable de debilidad por un viejo oporto hoy.

—Habrá una botella extra, señor.

—Todo irá favorablemente para usted. No tengo motivos para dudarlo —dijo el doctor Willoughby, arrastrando a su anfitrión fuera de la biblioteca.

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54 Catulo, *Carmina,* 43.1: «La primavera vuelve a traer templados calores». Meredith traduce el verso siguiente.

XLII

Muestra las artes de adivinación de una mente perceptiva

SALIENDO de la casa, pocos minutos antes de que el doctor Middleton y sir Willoughby hubieran entrado en el salón durante la noche, Vernon se despidió del coronel De Craye en las puertas del parque y se dirigió a la casa de campo de los Dale, donde no se tenían noticias de su vagabundo, y recibió la misma respuesta decepcionante del doctor Corney desde la ventana del dormitorio del afable médico, cuyo asombro por que hubiera hecho tan largo camino de noche en busca de un muchacho como Crossjay —dotado con las vidas de un gato— se volvió violento y se transformó en puñetazos sobre el alféizar cuando Vernon rehusó entrar y descansar. La excusa de Vernon era que «no tenía a nadie de quien preocuparse salvo ese muchacho» y se alejó a grandes zancadas, mencionando una granja a cinco millas de distancia. El doctor Corney aulló una invitación a desayunar con él si pasaba de vuelta y se fue a la cama pensando en él. El resultado de una variedad de conjeturas hizo que Vernon se convirtiera en el paladín de la señorita Middleton y que sintiera una gran compasión por su pobre amigo. «Aunque», pensó, «una adhesión sin esperanzas es un acompañamiento tan bueno para la canción de la vida como cualquiera que un caballero podría desear, pues es una de esas grandes dosis de discordia que hacen de las pequeñas una armonía agradable, por lo que pasará como el favorito de la fortuna cuando haya que computarlas».

Sir Willoughby era el favorito de la fortuna en opinión del pequeño doctor; aquel caballero vivaz tenía riqueza, consideración pública y la joven más hermosa del mundo por prometida. Sin embargo, aunque tenía en cuenta el valor de todas las ventajas de las que disfrutaba sir Willoughby, imaginaba que el último balance de la buena fortuna sería favorable a Vernon. Para ello tenía que reducir el cálculo a su extrema abstracción y alimentar a su delgado amigo, por decirlo así, con rocío y raíces; el efecto feliz para Vernon residía en un futuro distante, al borde de la vejez, donde sería bendecido con la preferencia arrepentida de su dama y se regocijaría en los frutos de los buenos hábitos constitucionales. Esa mente revisora era irlandesa. El carácter de sir Willoughby era profundamente opuesto a la naturaleza del doctor Corney, cuyos instintos se erizaban de antagonismo: no por su raza, pues Vernon era de la misma raza, en parte de la misma sangre, y Corney lo quería; la molestia estaba en el tipo. La circunstancia de su prevalencia en el condado donde se encontraba, aunque lo mantenía en silencio como si fuera una ley, acumulaba montones de insurgencia en el pecho celta. Corney contemplando a sir Willoughby, y un guerrero irlandés a las órdenes de Strongbow, tenían cierto parecido entre ellos, con la diferencia de que Corney conocía a un amigo mejor adaptado para la situación eminente y en especial mejor adaptado para agradar a una amable dama, ¡si esas inglesas bien criadas pudieran concebir otra idea de la virilidad que la del ídolo formal de madera de su culto nacional! [55] .

El doctor Corney desayunó muy temprano sin ver a Vernon. Salió a ver a un paciente mientras la primera alondra de la mañana cantaba en lo alto y los asuntos de los hombres no habían caído aún sobre ellos en forma de nube, felizmente mezclados son los colores y los trinos de la naturaleza. Al girar un recodo del angosto camino, una hora más tarde, contempló a un joven metido de cabeza en un seto y, por el peculiar movimiento de las partes traseras, indicativas de su propósito, distinguió claramente al joven Crossjay, que salió con huevos en la mano. El doctor frenó.

—¿De qué pájaro? —gritó.

—Escribano —respondió Crossjay.

—Deje un par de esos huevos en el nido, señor.

—No me dé órdenes —replicó Crossjay—. ¡Oh, es usted, doctor Corney. Buenos días. He dicho eso porque siempre devuelvo un par. Le prometí al señor Whitford que lo haría y también a la señorita Middleton.

—¿Has desayunado?

—Aún no.

—¿No tienes hambre?

—Tendría hambre si pensara en ello.

—Sube.

—Creo que no debería, doctor Corney.

—Harás lo que el doctor Corney te diga: concéntrate en lonchas de panceta y en café humeante, tostadas, galletas, mermelada y compota de ciruela. ¡Se abren las fosas nasales y hay saliva en las comisuras de la boca! Arriba, hombre.

Crossjay saltó junto al doctor, que observó, mientras arreaba al caballo:

—No necesitaba a nadie esta mañana, aunque te enrolaré a mi servicio. ¿Le tienes cariño a la señorita Middleton?

En lugar de responder, Crossjay suspiró como lo hacen los enamorados.

—También yo —siguió el doctor—. Tienes que habértelas con un rival. Es peor que el cariño: estoy enamorado de ella. ¿Qué te parece?

—No me importa cuántos la *amen* —dijo Crossjay.

—Mereces un desayuno gratuito en el salón delantero del mejor hotel del lugar que llaman Arcadia. ¿Qué tal tu cama esta noche?

—Regular.

—Es duro que los huesos no tengan almohadones.

—No me preocupa la cama. Un par de horas es suficiente para mí.

—Pero le tienes cariño a la señorita Middleton y eso es una virtud.

Para su sorpresa, el doctor Corney contempló dos grandes lágrimas que se abrían camino a través de los ojos del tozudo muchacho, sin que su rostro dejara de mostrarse orgulloso.

Crossjay dijo, cuando pudo confiar en separar los labios:

—Tengo que ver al señor Whitford.

—¿Tienes noticias suyas?

—Tengo que preguntarle algo. Sobre lo que debo hacer.

—Entonces, muchacho, tienes el nombre correcto en la dirección equivocada, pues te encontré dándole la espalda al señor Whitford. No ha dormido. Se ha pasado buscándote toda la intempestiva noche que le has dado. Eso es melancólico. ¿Qué dices de seguir mi consejo?

Crossjay suspiró.

—No puedo hablar con nadie más que con el señor Whitford.

—¿Y estás impaciente por hablar con él?

—Lo necesito.

—Y te encuentro huyendo de él. Es usted una curiosidad, señor Crossjay Patterne.

—¡Ah! Lo sería cualquier que supiera tanto como yo —dijo Crossjay, con una sobria tristeza que obligó al doctor a tratarlo con seriedad.

—El hecho —dijo— es que el señor Whitford está batiendo el campo en tu busca. Lo mejor será llevarte a la casa.

—Preferiría no ir a la casa —dijo Crossjay con decisión.

—No podrás ver a la señorita Middleton en ninguna otra parte que no sea la casa.

—No quiero ver a la señorita Middleton si no puedo serle útil en algo.

—¿No la amenazará ningún peligro, verdad?

Crossjay trato la pregunta como si no se hubiera planteado.

—Ahora dime —dijo el doctor Corney—, ¿hay alguna oportunidad para mí, en el supuesto de que la señorita Middleton no esté comprometida?

La respuesta fue sencilla.

—Estoy seguro de que ella no querría.

—¿Y por qué estás tan seguro?

Crossjay no dijo nada, pero el doctor insistió y, al final, Crossjay dio su opinión respecto a que la señorita Middleton escogería al señor Whitford.

El doctor preguntó por qué y Crossjay dijo que porque el señor Whitford era el mejor hombre del mundo, a lo que, con un vigoroso «Amén a eso», el doctor Corney replicó:

—Imaginaba que el coronel De Craye tendría la primera oportunidad: es más el hombre para ella.

Crossjay volvió a sorprenderlo con un petulante «No».

El muchacho añadió:

—No quiero hablar, salvo de pájaros y cosas. ¡Qué bonita mañana! He visto salir el sol. No llueve hoy. Tiene usted razón respecto al hambre, doctor Corney.

El amable hombrecito hizo restallar el látigo. Crossjay le informó de su desgracia en la casa y de todo cuanto tenía que ver con ello, desde el vagabundo al baronet, salvo la aventura de la señorita Middleton y la escena nocturna en el salón. Un fuerte olor a algo no dicho golpeó al doctor Corney y dijo:

—No le hagas saber a la señorita Middleton lo que siento por ella. Al fin y al cabo, no es más que un poco de amor. Pero, como Patrick le dijo a Kathleen, cuando ella tuvo ese poco, es lo mejor de todo. Y tenía tanta razón como yo con el hambre.

Crossjay no quiso hablar de amor. Declaró:

—Nunca le diré a la señorita Middleton lo que siento. Vaya, ¡esa es la casa de la señorita Dale!

—Está más cerca de tu vacío interior que mi mansión —dijo el doctor— y nos detendremos a preguntar si hay una cama para ti esta noche; si no, te vendrás conmigo y te embotellaré y te exhibiré como una especie rara. Del señor Dale puedes contar con el desayuno. Veo a un caballero.

—Es el coronel De Craye.

—Viene en busca de noticias tuyas.

—¡Me extraña!

—La señorita Middleton lo envía, por supuesto.

Crossjay se volvió hacia el doctor.

—¡No la he visto desde hace tiempo! Pero él me vio la pasada noche y se lo podría haber dicho a ella si estaba ansiosa. Buenos días, coronel. He dado un buen paseo y me han recogido, y estoy tan hambriento como la tripulación del bote del capitán Bligh [56] .

Bajó de un salto.

El coronel y el doctor se saludaron sonriendo.

—He tocado la campana —dijo De Craye.

Una sirvienta acudió a la puerta y tras ella apareció la señorita Dale, que corrió hacia Crossjay, mezclando besos y reproches. Leticia apenas levantó su cara hacia el coronel más que para devolver su saludo y excusarse por el hambriento muchacho al que daría su desayuno.

—Esperaré —dijo De Craye. Había visto que Leticia estaba más pálida de lo habitual. También el doctor Corney y la llamó para preguntar por la salud de su padre. Leticia le dijo que aún no se había levantado y se llevó a Crossjay consigo.

—Está bien —dijo el doctor— que el inválido duerma mucho. Sin embargo, la dama no parece encontrarse bien. Pero las damas varían; muestran lo que les pasa en el rostro por falta del empuje con el que nosotros lo ocultamos; son como banderas militares para un funeral o una gala: un día plegadas y al otro ondeantes. Los hombres son mascarones de proa, iguales ante la calma o la tempestad y no demasiado favorecidos, gracias al océano. Hace mucho tiempo que no nos veíamos, coronel: a bordo del bote de Dublín, recuerdo, de noche.

—Recuerdo que me puso usted de pie, doctor.

—Ah y a usted le agradó advertir que Corney no es un matasanos en el mar, un favor de los monjes de la Chartreuse, cuyo elixir tiene el poder de calmar las olas. Ya sabemos qué milagros obran.

—¡Ponga a un médico y a un monje juntos, doctor!

—Es cierto: sería un milagro que combinaran. Aunque la cura del alma es a menudo la cura completa del cuerpo. Se dice maliciosamente que el cuerpo entregado a nuestro tratamiento es una muestra de que el alma ha volado. A propósito, coronel, ese muchacho tiene algo en la cabeza.

—Supongo que habrá estado molestando a algún granjero o guardabosque.

—Sondéelo. Lo encontrará tirante. La señorita Middleton le ha sorbido los sesos. Hay algo secreto y no está alegre con ello.

—Lo veremos —dijo el coronel.

El doctor Corney asintió.

—Tengo que visitar a mi paciente aquí, ahora. He llegado demasiado pronto para él, así que haré una visita o dos a los pájaros cojos que ya se han despertado —señaló antes de marcharse.

De Craye empezó a dar vueltas por el jardín. Era un caballero de ingenio activamente perceptivo que, cuando reflexionaba, lo hacía a salto de mata: imaginamos que ante un espejo danzarín en su interior. Se daba cuenta de una trama de golpe y de golpe formaba una, pero en ambos casos después de haber estado merodeando largo rato y de una deliberación compleja, ejerciendo pacientemente su capacidad de percepción. El hecho de que se considerase que a Crossjay se le había metido en la cabeza la señorita Middleton suscitaba una serie de imágenes de todo lo relacionado con Crossjay durante las últimas cuarenta horas que formaban un relieve delante del coronel y, como en modo alguno especulaba sobre ninguna de ellas, sino que se limitaba a pasar de una a otra y a examinarlas, el halcón que era en espíritu así como por su rostro encantador consintió que su instinto se dirigiera allí donde podía golpear. Una disposición reflexiva corre ese peligro en la acción: suele precipitar una conjetura con el propósito de manejar probabilidades con los métodos y en las trazas a las que se ha acostumbrado, y conjeturar apresuradamente es jugar con los enigmas del laberinto. Aquel que observa desde arriba, con calma, trazando círculos y captándolo todo con su ojo reúne un material que hace del secreto un asunto para que el cerebro sopese y equilibre; dará o no con la pista correcta, con frecuencia no; pero escapará a la maraña de su propia inteligencia y estará siempre más cerca del enigma que el que se limita a adivinar o calcular, conservando una amplitud de miras que los otros malogran. Sin embargo, debe tener su momento de éxito, ser agudo además de perceptivo, un lector de rasgos, adecuado cuando haga falta.

De Craye quería ver a la señorita Dale. Había vuelto a casa repentinamente, no, al parecer, por la enfer-

medad de su padre, y el coronel recordaba sus párpados enrojecidos cuando una noche pasó junto a ella por el pasillo. Leticia le envió a Crossjay tan pronto como el muchacho estuvo saciado. Él le envió de vuelta a Crossjay con una petición. Ella no respondió de inmediato. Se detuvo frente a la puerta con reluctancia y parecía desconcertada. De Craye le pidió un mensaje para la señorita Middleton. No lo había. Persistió. Pero realmente no había nada, dijo ella.

—¿No me confiara la menor palabra? —dijo él, y le hizo pensar visiblemente si podía despachar una palabra. No podía: no tenía corazón para ningún mensaje.

—La veré dentro de uno o dos días, coronel De Craye.

—La echará mucho de menos.

—Pronto nos encontraremos.

—¡Pobre Willoughby!

Leticia se ruborizó y se mantuvo en silencio.

Una mariposa de cierta rareza atrajo a Crossjay.

—Temo que haya hecho algo malo —dijo Leticia—. No he logrado que me mirase.

—¿Tenía apetito?

—Mucho.

De Craye asintió. Un muchacho con apetito no es una cerradura desesperada.

El coronel y Crossjay se alejaron por el jardín.

—Ahora —dijo el coronel— veremos si podemos arreglar un encuentro entre la señorita Middleton y tú. Eres afortunado, pues ella siempre está pensando en ti.

—Sé que yo siempre estoy pensando en ella —dijo Crossjay.

—Si alguna vez estás en apuros, ella es la persona a la que debes acudir.

—¡Sí, si sé dónde está!

—Bueno, estará en la casa señorial.

No hubo respuesta: el terrible secreto de Crossjay le vino a la garganta. Era una cerradura más débil después del desayuno.

—Necesito ver antes al señor Whitford —dijo.

—¿Tienes algo que decirle?

—No sé qué hacer. ¡No lo entiendo! —El secreto se le salía de la boca. Se lo tragó—. Sí, he de hablar con el señor Whitford.

—Es otro de los amigos de la señorita Middleton.

—Sé que lo es. Es puro acero.

—Todos somos amigos suyos, Crossjay. Me halaga pensar que soy un Toledo cuando hace falta. ¿Cuánto tiempo llevabas en la casa anoche cuando te encontraste conmigo?

—No lo sé, señor. Me quedé dormido un rato y luego me desperté...

—¿Dónde estabas?

—Estaba en el salón.

—Vamos, Crossjay, a ti no te dan miedo los fantasmas. Lo parecías cuando te estrellaste contra mi estómago.

—No creo en esas cosas. ¿Y usted, coronel? ¡No es posible!

—No hace falta decirlo. Esperemos que no. No sería juego limpio. Un hombre con un fantasma que lo respalde vencerá a otros diez. No podemos luchar con él ni jugar a las cartas ni tener una oportunidad si es nuestro rival en el amor. ¿Viste un fantasma?

—¡No eran fantasmas! —Crossjay dijo aquello de lo que estaba seguro y su voz confirmó su convicción.

—Dudo que la señorita Middleton sea particularmente feliz —observó el coronel—. ¿Por qué? Bueno, tú la disgustas, ya sabes, ahora y entonces.

El muchacho se creció.

—Iría... Iría... No querría que fuera desgraciada... ¡Eso es! ¡Eso es! No sé qué debo hacer. Querría poder ver al señor Whitford.

—Vas a pasar apuros, muchacho.

—No estaba en apuros ayer.

—¿Así que encontraste una cama confortable en el salón? Por fortuna sir Willoughby no te vio.

—¡Claro que no!

—De milagro, ¿no es así?

—Estaba bajo una colcha de algo sedoso.

—¿Te despertó?

—Supongo. Lo oí.

—¿Hablar?

—Estaba hablando.

—¿Qué? ¿Consigo mismo?

—No.

El secreto amenazaba a Crossjay con salir o ahogarlo.

De Craye le dio un respiro.

—Te gusta sir Willoughby, ¿verdad?

Crossjay lo afirmó sin provecho.

—Es amable contigo —dijo el coronel—. Te ayudará a establecerte y protegerá tus intereses.

—Sí, me gusta —dijo Crossjay con su acostumbrada rapidez en rozar el asunto—. Me gusta; es amable y todo eso, me da propinas y juega conmigo y todo eso; pero no he podido averiguar por qué no quiso ver a mi padre cuando mi padre vino aquí caminando diez millas para verlo y tuvo que desandarlas bajo la lluvia y luego un largo trecho en tren hasta casa, en Davenport, porque sir Willoughby no quiso verlo, aunque estaba en casa, mi padre lo vio. Todos lo consideramos extraño y mi padre no nos deja hablar mucho al respecto. Mi padre es un hombre muy valiente.

—El capitán Patterne es tan valiente como cualquier hombre lo haya sido —dijo De Craye.

—Estoy seguro de que le gustaría, coronel.

—Conozco sus hazañas y lo admiro y ese es un buen paso para que me guste.

Alentó los pensamientos del muchacho sobre su padre.

—Porque lo que dicen en casa es un poco de pan y queso, una jarra de cerveza y lo demás para un pobre hombre; muchas grandes casas le darían eso y no habríamos pedido más. Mis hermanas dicen que piensan que sir Willoughby debe ser un egoísta. Es terriblemente orgulloso y tal vez fuera porque mi padre no iba suficientemente bien vestido. Pero ¿qué podemos hacer? Somos muy pobres en mi casa, y somos muchos, y todos hambrientos. Mi padre dice que no le han pagado demasiado bien sus servicios al gobierno. Solo es un marine.

—¡Es un héroe! —dijo De Craye.

—Llegó a casa muy cansado, con un resfriado, y tuvo que ir al médico. Pero sir Willoughby le envió dinero y mi madre quería devolverlo y mi padre dijo que no era una mujer, con nuestra gran familia. Dijo que pensaba que sir Willoughby era un hombre extraordinario.

—No del todo; corriente, indígena —dijo De Craye—. El arte de cortar es una de las ramas de la educación refinada en este país y tendrás que aprenderlo si esperas que te consideren un caballero y un Patterne, muchacho. Empiezo a darme cuenta de por qué la señorita Middleton te ha adoptado. Sigue sus consejos. Pero espero que no escucharas una conversación privada. La señorita Middleton no lo aprobaría.

—Coronel De Craye, ¿cómo habría podido evitarlo? Oí una buena parte antes de saber que lo era. ¡Era poesía!

—Calma, Crossjay, si era importante, ¿lo era?

El muchacho se creció de nuevo y el coronel le preguntó:

—¿Sabe la señorita Dale que estabas de oyente?

—¡Ella! —dijo Crossjay—. ¡Oh! No podría decírselo a *ella* .

Respiró pesadamente y lo amenazaron las lágrimas.

—Ella no le haría daño a la señorita Middleton. Estoy seguro de eso. No fue culpa suya. Ella... ¡Por allí va el señor Whitford!

Crossjay se alejó de un salto.

El coronel no tenía intención de esperar a que volviera. Caminó a toda prisa sin ser consciente de que su motivo era adelantarse a Vernon Whitford, a quien, al fin y al cabo, el conocimiento que Crossjay pudiera transmitirle no le resultaría demasiado ventajoso. ¡Probablemente corriera a exigirle a Willoughby que rompiera su compromiso con la señorita Middleton! Hay hombres, pensó De Craye, que no ven nada, que no sienten nada.

Subió por unos escalones al bosque sobre el lago, donde, como solía pensar considerándose afortunado, dio por sentado, al verla, que los hados habían colocado a la dama que le había enseñado a saltar a su corazón. No le maravilló el poder de la dama, pues rara vez había visto el mundo una unión semejante de una princesa y una sílfide como en su figura. Ella llevaba una rama de haya y contemplaba el agua.

Ella no lo había oído. Cuando lo vio se ruborizó ante el espectáculo de uno de sus miles de pensamientos, pero no se sorprendió; el color inundó un rostro serio.

—No es la primera vez que Willoughby recurre a este truco —le dijo De Craye, sonriendo amablemente con la boca abierta.

Clara movió los labios para recabar alguna observación introductoria a una irrupción tan abrupta y extraña.

El coronel sonrió a la manera peculiar de una iluminada percepción cómica: por el momento era el hal-

cón y se sorprendió más que Clara, que no tenía el ánimo propicio a las sorpresas. Haberla visto lo animó a la caza; estaba en ello.

Otro instinto al acecho (brotan por veintenas cuando el corazón es el cazador) le urgía a ser directo y rápido y arrastrarla con la corriente del descubrimiento.

Clara recobró parte de su dominio mental tan pronto como se dio cuenta de un significado que no había examinado, pero tenía que someterse a la dirección del coronel, percibiendo en la deriva las corrientes separadas de lo que él tenía en mente y lo que tenía ella.

—Señorita Middleton, me parezco un poco al mensajero del déspota glorioso; ¡que me corten la cabeza si no digo la verdad! Todo lo que digo es azaroso. ¿Contrarío su deseo? Lo leo en la oscuridad, con el corazón. Pero hay una certeza. Willoughby la libera.

—¿Lo ha enviado él? —Clara no podía imaginar otra cosa y era incapaz de preservar un disfraz. Temblaba.

—La señorita Dale.

—¡Ah! —dejó caer Clara—. Ella me lo dijo una vez.

—Ahora es un hecho.

—¿No ha visto a Willoughby desde que salió de la casa?

—Oscuramente, con bastante claridad, no distinto a la mano del destino, a través de un velo. Se ofreció a la señorita Dale anoche, entre las horas embrujadas de las doce y la una.

—¿A la señorita Dale?

—¿Podría ser otra? La pobre dama ha languidecido más de una década. Es el amor en femenino.

—¿Está usted hablando en serio, coronel De Craye?

—¿Podría ser trivial con usted, señorita Middleton?

—Tengo razones para saber que no puede ser.

—Si tengo cabeza, es una verdad fresca y floreciente. Más: ¡apuesto mi vanidad a ello!

—Déjeme ir con ella.

Clara echó a andar.

—Piénselo —dijo él.

—La señorita Dale y yo somos excelentes amigas. No le parecerá falto de delicadeza. Me tiene en consideración por Crossjay. ¡Oh! ¿Puede ser? Ha de ser un engaño. Usted ha visto... Usted desea serme útil, es fácil engañarlo. ¿Anoche? ¿Él, anoche? ¡Y esta mañana!

—No es la primera vez que nuestro amigo ha recurrido a este truco, señorita Middleton.

—Pero es increíble: anoche... Y esta mañana, en presencia de mi padre, ¡insistía! ¿Ha visto usted a la señorita Dale? Todo es posible con Willoughby: estaban juntos, lo sé. Coronel De Craye, no tengo la más ligera oportunidad de ocultarme con usted. Creo que lo siento desde la primera vez que lo vi. ¿Quiere decirme por qué está usted tan seguro?

—Señorita Middleton, cuando tuve el honor de verla por primera vez, fue en una posición que necesitaba mirar arriba y moralmente ha sido así desde entonces. Creía que Willoughby había ganado el mayor premio de la tierra. Luego llegué a la conclusión de que lo había ganado para perderlo. Si le preocupa es un misterio que no tengo tiempo para sondear. Él mismo es la principal consideración para sí mismo y siempre lo ha sido.

—¡Lo ha descubierto! —dijo Clara.

—Él lo ha desvelado —dijo De Craye—. El milagro es que el mundo no lo haya visto. Pero el mundo es un mundo codicioso del tipo rico que llena su pesebre y eso es lo que él siempre ha hecho sagazmente. Solo las mujeres, además de mí mismo, lo han detectado. Nunca lo he puesto en evidencia; he sido un observador pura y simplemente y, como me doy cuenta de que otra catástrofe, que haría la cuarta, hasta donde sé, va a hacerse pública...

—¿Conoció usted a la señorita Durham?

—Y también a Harry Oxford. Y es una pareja tan feliz como un par de mirlos en un cerezo en un amanecer de verano mientras el dueño del jardín duerme. Debido a mi aprehensión, había rechazado ser el padrino hasta que Willoughby me envió una tercera carta. Confiaba con toda mi alma que no me traicionaría a mí mismo. Le confieso mi deber con mi posición de ocultamiento. No puedo decir que haya escondido tanto las cosas que no haya usado mis ojos: ellos responderán.

El coronel usaba sus ojos con una suavidad creciente que amenazaba con ser más que dulzura.

—Creo que ha sido usted sinceramente amable —dijo Clara—. Vayamos al sendero junto al lago.

No rechazó su mano en el descenso y el coronel la dejó escapar cuando el servicio acabó. Mientras representara el admirable papel de hombre de honor tendría que atender a los detalles y, aunque empezaba a estar seguro de ella, había un toque desconocido en Clara Middleton que le hacía temer que destruyera su seguridad a pesar de un impulso apenas resistible que provenía de sus emociones y sus máximas aprobaban.

Miró su mano, la mano de una dama libre. Con Willoughby descartado, su oportunidad era grande. ¿Quién más estaba en el camino? Nadie. Se aconsejó a sí mismo esperarla: ella tenía ideas de delicadeza. El rostro de Clara mostraba inquietud, especulación; el ceño fruncido, los labios apretados.

—Usted no se lo ha oído a la señorita Dale —dijo Clara.

—Anoche estaban juntos; esta mañana ella ha huido. La he visto turbada esta mañana. No ha sido capaz de enviarle a usted un mensaje: habla vagamente de encontrarse con usted en unos días. Y no es la primera vez que él acude a ella para consolarse.

—Eso no es una proposición —reflexionó Clara—. Willoughby es demasiado prudente. No le hizo ninguna proposición en la época que usted menciona. ¿No se ha precipitado usted, coronel De Craye?

Por la cabeza de Clara cruzaron algunas sombras. Miró en dirección a la casa y se detuvo.

—Anoche, señorita Middleton, había alguien escuchando.

—¿Quién?

—Crossjay estaba debajo del tapete de seda elaborado por las señoritas Patterne. Llegó tarde a casa, encontró su puerta cerrada y, bajando las escaleras, se metió en el salón, donde se acurrucó y se quedó dormido. Los dos interlocutores lo despertaron; atemorizaron al pobre muchacho por el amor que le tiene a usted y, cuando se fueron, quiso salir de la casa. Lo encontré entonces, justo cuando regresaba de buscarlo, fuera de sí, y me lo llevé a mi habitación, lo acosté en el sofá y lo reñí por no estarse quieto. Se agitaba como un pez en la orilla. Cuando me desperté por la mañana ya no estaba. El doctor Corney lo encontró en un recodo del camino y lo llevó a la casa de campo. Yo estaba tocando la campana. Corney me dijo que usted le había sorbido los sesos al muchacho y que era desgraciado, así que Crossjay y yo tuvimos una conversación.

—¿Crossjay no le repetiría a usted la conversación que había oído? —dijo Clara.

—No.

Ella sonrió, regocijándose, orgullosa del muchacho, mientras caminaba.

—Pero, perdóneme, señorita Middleton —y estoy a favor del muchacho tanto como usted—, si soy culpable de cierta pesca.

—Simpatizo con el pez.

—El pobre muchacho tenía un secreto que le hacía daño. Emergió a la superficie clamando por el anzuelo y yo le ahorré dos o tres porque tenía una especie de sentimiento sagrado, que yo respeté, de que solo el señor Whitford debía ser su padre confesor.

—¡Crossjay! —exclamó Clara, expresando su amor por el muchacho.

—El secreto podía comunicarse a la señorita Dale menos que a nadie.

—¿Dijo eso?

—Literalmente. Ella me dijo también que no había logrado que el muchacho la mirase a la cara.

—¡Oh eso parece! ¿Crossjay era desgraciado? ¿Mucho?

—Estaba a punto de llorar y lo habría hecho si no hubiera sido un joven tan viril.

—Parece... —Clara volvió en pensamiento a Willoughby y dudó y ciegamente se estrujó las manos recordando el extraño y viejo monstruo que había descubierto en él. Un hombre así podía hacer cualquier cosa.

La conclusión la fortificó para seguir su paseo hasta la casa solariega y batallar por su libertad. Willoughby apenas le parecía humano, ilegible, salvo por la clave que ella aportaba. Decidió confiar en la maravillosa adivinación de las circunstancias que el coronel De Craye había practicado en la oscuridad. La maravilla es un arma cuando nos atacan los prodigios reales de la naturaleza. Su rostro se despejó. Habló con De Craye del mundo refinado y político, arrojando por completo la carga que llevaba sobre sí y llenando de encanto al coronel.

Al borde del jardín, en el puente que cruzaba el dique hacia el parque, el coronel tuvo un segundo impulso, casi una advertencia en su interior, para aprovechar su oportunidad celestial y dar las gracias y parpadear tiernamente insinuando su recompensa. Se lo imaginó, dudando de la sensatez.

Algo como «El cielo me perdone» pasó por la cabeza de Clara, aunque se habría declarado inocente ante el escrutador.

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55 Richard de Clare, segundo conde Pembroke (1130-1176), conocido como Strongbow, encabezó la invasión normanda de Irlanda.

56 William Bligh (1754-1817) fue el capitán del *HMS Bounty,* cuya tripulación se amotinó y lo dejó a la deriva en un bote junto a sus marineros leales.

XLIII

En el que sir Willoughby se ve obligado a pensar que los elementos conspiran contra él

CLARA no había dado muchos pasos en el jardín antes de que se diera cuenta de lo grande que era su deuda de gratitud con el coronel De Craye. Willoughby y su padre la esperaban. De Craye, con su pronta comprensión de las circunstancias, se desvió sin ser visto entre los arbustos. Clara avanzó lentamente.

—¿Podemos confiar en que los vapores se hayan disipado? —la saludó su padre.

—Una palabra y estas discusiones habrán terminado. A los dos nos disgustan por igual —dijo Willoughby.

—Sin escenas —añadió el doctor Middleton—. Di lo que hayas decidido, chiquilla, *pro forma,* dándote cuenta de que quien tiene el derecho lo pide, y te ruego que me liberes.

Clara miró a Willoughby.

—He decidido pedir el consejo de la señorita Dale.

Willoughby no aparentó ser un hombre al que hubieran disparado.

—¿De la señorita Dale? ¿Consejo?

El doctor Middleton invocó a las Furias.

—¿Cuál es el significado de esta nueva rareza?

—He de consultar a la señorita Dale, papá.

—¿Consultarla en referencia a disponer de tu mano en matrimonio?

—Debo hacerlo.

—¿Has dicho la señorita Dale?

—Sí, papá.

El doctor Middleton recobró su elevación natural de la inclinación del cuerpo habitual en las personas de salud establecida, pedagogos y otros, a los que se llama a intervalos para examinar la magnitud de lo infinitesimalmente absurdo en la naturaleza humana: pequeña, es decir, a la luz de la razón, inmensa en el reino de la locura.

Su hija lo confundía profundamente. Hinchó su pecho y le advirtió a Willoughby:

—No me extraña la expresión desconcertada de su semblante, amigo mío. Descubrirse a sí mismo comprometido con una muchacha tan loca como Casandra, sin un asomo de distinción por sufrir una insolación, no es una ilustración especialmente cómoda. Me opongo a la demora y no permitiré que una hija mía perpetre una traición de la confianza.

—No repitas esas palabras —le dijo Clara a Willoughby.

Willoughby se sobresaltó. Era evidente que venía armada. Pero ¿cómo, en tan poco tiempo? ¿Qué podía haberla instruido? En su perplejidad miró apresuradamente hacia arriba, tragó aire y gritó:

—¿Desconcertada, señor? No soy consciente de que mi semblante muestre desconcierto. No estoy acostumbrado a pedir durante tanto tiempo; soy incapaz de representar el papel de suplicante humilde. Ella me pone al margen de la armonía con la creación. Estamos comprometidos, Clara. Es una pura pérdida de tiempo hablar de solicitar consejo al respecto.

—¿Sería traicionar la confianza que yo rompiera mi compromiso? —dijo Clara.

—¿Lo preguntas?

—Es vulnerar la cordura proponer la pregunta —dijo su padre.

Clara miró a Willoughby:

—¿Ahora?

Willoughby se encogió de hombros con arrogancia.

—¿Desde anoche? —dijo ella.

—¿Anoche?

—¿No soy libre?

—Yo no te he liberado.

—Con tus hechos.

—¡Mi querida Clara!

—¿No has roto virtualmente el compromiso?

—¿Yo, que te reclamo como mía?

—¿Puedes?

—Puedo y debo.

—¿Después de anoche?

—¡Tretas! ¡Evasivas! ¡Balbuceos de una mujer bárbara sobre las evoluciones de una serpiente! —exclamó el doctor Middleton—. Ibas a capitular o a dar las razones de tu rechazo. No tienes ninguna. Dale tu mano, muchacha, de acuerdo con el pacto. Te he alabado ante él por volver en el plazo fijado y ahora me abstendré de hacerte desgraciada o de serlo yo.

—¿Es él completamente libre de ofrecer la suya? Pregúntaselo, papá.

—Cumple con tu deber. ¡Tengamos paz!

—¡Completamente libre! Como el día en que te la ofrecí por primera vez.

Willoughby tendió con franqueza su honorable mano.

Su rostro estaba pálido: parecía que hubiera enemigos en el aire que le hubieran susurrado cosas a Clara. Dudaba de la fidelidad de los poderes superiores.

—¿Desde anoche? —dijo ella.

—¡Oh! Si insistes, respondo: desde anoche.

—Usted sabe lo que quiero decir, sir Willoughby.

—¡Oh! Desde luego.

—¿Dice usted la verdad?

—*¡Sir* Willoughby! —exclamó su padre airado—. Pero ¿querrás explicar lo que te propones, epítome como eres de todas las contradicciones y mutabilidades adscritas a las mujeres desde el principio? *Desde luego,* dice él, sin saber más que yo. Ella pide gracia durante una hora y vuelve con toda una reserva de evasivas para insultar al hombre al que ha herido. Me humilla confesar que nuestra parte en este contrato está a salvo de la ignominia pública gracias a la generosidad de sir Willoughby. No puedo felicitarlo por su fortuna aunque condescienda a soportar contigo lo máximo que pueda soportar, pues, en lugar de la joven que yo suponía que le entregaba, veo a una fantástica *planguncula* dotada de vida por el temperamento desenfrenado de una muchachita [57] . Si pudiéramos darle sentido, en una defensa miserable de semejante conducta, diríamos que el espíritu de los celos se ha apoderado de ella.

—Solo puedo señalar que no hay fundamento para eso —dijo Willoughby—. Estoy dispuesto a satisfacerte, Clara. Dime quién es la persona que te turba. No imagino que exista, pero ¿quién podría decirlo?

Ella no podía decirlo. La detestable imputación de celos se confirmaría si mencionaba un nombre. No podía nombrar a Leticia.

Willoughby se aprovechó de su ventaja.

—Los celos son algo extraño para mí. Imagino, señor, que los caballeros los han desechado. Hablo por mí. Pero puedo hacer concesiones. En algunos casos se considera un cumplido y una palabra los alivia. ¡Todo el asunto es absurdo! Sin embargo, me sentaré en el banquillo como testigo o prisionero. Cualquier cosa con tal de tranquilizar una mente destemplada.

—De usted, señor —dijo el doctor Middleton—, un padre podría sentirse orgulloso.

—No se trata de celos. No podría estar celosa —exclamó Clara, impulsada por la pasión. Se devanaba los sesos para encontrar un modo de ganarse la lenidad, si no la estima de su padre. No era una doncella de hierro, sino una joven de naturaleza nerviosa que vivía el momento, aunque lo estuviera sacrificando a la profunda aversión de su naturaleza—. Volverás a estar orgullosa de mí, papá.

No podría haber dicho algo menos pertinente.

—*Optume,* pero atente *ad rem»* —respondió su padre, alarmado—. *Firmavit fidem* . Haz lo mismo y deja de jugar con nosotros como una gata.

—Quiero ver a la señorita Dale —dijo.

El reverendo doctor levantó los brazos con una desesperación colérica que parecía una imprecación.

—Está en su casa. Podrías haberla visto —dijo Willoughby.

Evidentemente no lo había hecho.

—¿No es verdad que anoche, entre las doce y la una, en el salón, le propuso usted matrimonio a la señorita Dale?

Willoughby estaba convencido de que Clara debía haberse apostado sigilosamente en las escaleras durante su coloquio con Leticia y escuchado tras la puerta.

—¿A propósito del viejo Vernon? —dijo Willoughby, riéndose levemente—. La idea no es nueva, como sabes. Están hechos el uno para el otro; solo han de darse cuenta. Leticia Dale y mi primo Vernon Whitford, señor.

—Bien pensado, amigo mío, y añadiré que tiene usted la paciencia, Willoughby, de un marido.

Willoughby se inclinó ante el elogio y dejó entrever cierta fatiga. Casi bostezó.

—No pretendo un título más feliz, señor —y restó importancia a la fastidiosa discusión.

Clara estaba conmovida: temía que Crossjay hubiera entendido mal o que el coronel De Craye se hubie-

ra equivocado en su conjetura. Era demasiado probable que Willoughby le hubiera propuesto a Leticia casarse con Vernon.

No tenía nada que confirmase su convicción salvo la vista del pánico en el rostro de Willoughby ante su persistencia en hablar de la señorita Dale. Clara podía haber jurado que estaba en lo cierto, aunque admitía que todas las suposiciones estaban en su contra. Por desgracia, todas las Delicadezas (un intrépido batallón para la defensa de las damas hasta que se meten en apuros y se deshace de golpe, como el cuenco de la lechera), todo el cuerpo de guardia de una joven, las sílfides de salón que llevan la cola de su vestido, que engalanan su cabello, modulan su voz y afinan su rostro, que son flechas y escudo para espantar a la criatura masculina, le prohibían decir lo que sentía so pena de cumplir inmediatamente su repetida amenaza de dejarla sin su protección. Clara no podía, como en un melodrama de altos vuelos, denunciar a Willoughby con el dedo, basándose en el testimonio de sus instintos, por falsear su discurso, por falsedad, simplemente. Ni siquiera podía declarar que dudaba de su sinceridad. El rigor de las leyes de la decencia que son un adorno de las damas de buena educación le vedaba el refugio de un acceso repentino, el refugio de las lágrimas, el pretexto de una indisposición.

—Un respiro, papá —imploró, amargamente consciente de la espesa maraña que su petición suponía y, aunque la delatase, dándose cuenta por medio de una iluminación de que el nudo podía desgraciadamente llegar a ser tan gordiano que solo en una nube de acontecimientos inesperados la intervención de un galante caballero venido del cielo, aunque con el parecido de un caballero de la tierra, podría cortarlo. Su grito silencioso, conforme sucumbía a la debilidad, se hizo más ferviente: «¡Cualquier cosa excepto casarme con él!». Se sentía débil para esforzarse y abandonada, una condición de las jóvenes cuando su energía imaginativa goza de la falta de control y es prospectivamente desesperada.

—¡Nada de respiro! —dijo Willoughby afablemente.

—¡Y yo añado que nada de respiro! —observó su padre—. Te has arrogado una posición que no te corresponde, Clara Middleton.

—No puedo soportar ofenderte, padre.

—¡A él! Tu deber es no ofenderlo a él. Dirígele a él tus excusas. No quiero verme arrastrado al mismo terreno para reiterar la misma orden perpetuamente.

—Si se delega la autoridad en mí, te lo exijo —dijo Willoughby.

—¿No has traicionado tu confianza conmigo?

—Decididamente no. ¿Cómo podría plantear, si no fuera así, mi exigencia?

—Une tu mano a la suya —dijo el doctor Middleton—. No, no es posible. No sé qué insana raíz habrá mordisqueado, pero debe someterse a la guía de aquellos a quienes no han abandonado los dioses hasta que su intelecto se libere. Una vez ella... Allí: no miraré atrás; si lo era, y no un simulacro de una hija razonable. Saludo la aparición de mi amigo el señor Whitford. Es mi baño de mar y mi cena en la playa de Troya tras un día de batalla y polvo.

Vernon avanzó firmemente hacia ellos, un hecho insólito en él, pues solía evitar las intrusiones.

Clara adivinó por ello, y más por el ceño inesperado de humor especulativo que puso Willoughby, que Vernon venía dispuesto a ayudarla. Su frente parecía curiosamente vivaz, como la de quien acaba de experimentar una sorpresa y alimenta gratos contenidos.

—¿Ha visto usted a Crossjay, señor Whitford? —dijo Clara.

—He saltado sobre él. Sus huesos son sólidos.

—¿Dónde ha dormido?

—En un sofá, al parecer.

Clara sonrió, llena de esperanza. Vernon tenía la historia.

Willoughby pensó que le tocaba defender su medida de severidad.

—El muchacho miente. Juega con dos barajas.

—Por ello habría que razonar con él en el pórtico griego de un muchacho [58] —dijo el reverendo doctor.

—Mi sistema es distinto, señor. No puedo infligir lo que yo mismo no puedo soportar.

—Por eso el griego ha sido excluido de las últimas generaciones y queda un campo, el más fértil en las moralidades de la juventud, sin labrar ni sembrar. ¡Ah! Bien. Este volvernos tan refinados es nuestro modo de recaer en la barbarie. Cuidado con el exceso de sensibilidad donde la naturaleza ha señalado con claridad una puerta alternativa al conocimiento. Ahora, supongo, quedo en libertad.

—Vernon nos excusará durante un minuto o dos.

—Me aferro al señor Whitford ahora que lo tengo.

—Me reuniré contigo en el laboratorio, Vernon —indicó Willoughby sin rodeos.

—Dejémoslos, señor Whitford. La suya es la disensión adecuada a un día particular que, en aras de la dignidad, ruborizaría nombrar.

—¿Qué día? —dijo Vernon como un patán.

—*El* día, lo llama la gente.

Vernon miró vivamente a uno y a otro. Sus ojos se fijaron en los de Willoughby con una vibrante insistencia, más allá del asombro, como si su humor se encontrara en un horno, y absorbió todo lo que vio.

Willoughby lo instó a marcharse.

—¿Ha visto usted a la señorita Dale, señor Whitford? —dijo Clara.

Vernon respondió:

—No. Algo la ha alterado.

—¿Sus sentimientos por Crossjay?

—¡Ah —le dijo Vernon a Willoughby—, guardarte en el bolsillo la llave del dormitorio de Crossjay fue una jugada maestra!

La ironía celestial inundó a Clara y ella se bañó y nadó en ella al oír a su víctima responder:

—Mis métodos de disciplina son bruscos. No era consciente de que ella estaba en su puerta.

—Pero tengo la esperanza de que la señorita Dale me viera —dijo Clara—. Tenemos simpatía por el muchacho.

—Podríamos ver al señor Dale. No parece tener la misma opinión que su hija —añadió Vernon—. Se ha encerrado en su habitación.

—No es el único padre en un apuro tan desagradable —dijo el doctor Middleton.

—Dice que vendrá a verte, Willoughby.

—¿Por qué a mí? —Willoughby contuvo su irritación—. Será bienvenido, por supuesto. Sería mejor que viniera el muchacho.

—Si hay una oportunidad de que lo perdones —dijo Clara.

—Hazles saber a los Dale que estoy dispuesto a escuchar al muchacho, Vernon. No hay necesidad de que el señor Dale tenga que venir aquí.

—¿Cómo es que el señor Dale y su hija no tienen la misma opinión, señor Whitford? —dijo Clara.

Vernon simuló estar intranquilo. Con una mirada ausente que se prolongó alrededor de Willoughby y resultó más incómoda que intencionada respondió:

—Tal vez ella no esté dispuesta a confiar plenamente en él, señorita Middleton.

—En ese aspecto, entonces, nuestras situaciones presentan su único punto de diferencia, pues la mía confía excesivamente en mí —observó el doctor Middleton.

Clara cerró los párpados para que pasara la oleada.

—Me parece que la señorita Dale es una persona de extremado candor.

—¿Por qué hemos de entrometernos en los asuntos domésticos de los Dale? —se interpuso Willoughby, sacando su reloj solo como diversión; estaba impaciente por saber si Vernon sabía tanto como Clara y se inclinaba porque no podía ser, aunque se ahogaba con la sensación de que sí; si era así, ¿qué eran los poderes superiores sino una banda de conspiradores? Le hizo ese cumplido a Leticia. No podía concebir la traición humana del secreto. El descubrimiento de Clara había dejado su sentido común a la deriva.

—Los asuntos domésticos de los Dale no me conciernen —dijo Vernon.

—Sin embargo, amigo mío —observó el doctor Middleton, guardando el equilibrio, con un aire de astucia, cuyo alcance no despertó a Willoughby hasta más tarde—, podrían concernirle. Añadiría, incluso, que hay una probabilidad de que sea usted la fuente y el origen de esa división de padre e hija, aunque pueda acusarse a Willoughby anoche, en el salón, de agente.

—Le ruego, señor, una explicación —dijo Vernon, tratando de obtenerla de Clara.

El doctor Middleton le pasó la explicación a Willoughby.

Clara comunicaba, hasta donde era capaz, con una de esas miradas de tranquila profundidad que dicen ¡Piense! y, sin suscitar pensamiento alguno, nos hacen transparentes.

Vernon lo comprendió antes de que Willoughby hablara. Su boca se cerró rígidamente y aumentó la luminosa agitación de sus ojos. Alguna de las estrellas que Clara había contemplado de noche se parecía a ellos en el vívido parpadeo y abundancia de su luz. Sin embargo, como Vernon estaba completamente calmado, nadie podía sospechar que su sangre se agolpaba con la risa y todo su ser se alzó para impedir que estallara. Tan feliz le hacía a Clara su aspecto que toda su ansiedad residía en recordar el nombre de la estrella cuyo resplandor atrae y habla, un espíritu de fuego. Es la única estrella que, en una noche de escarcha y claro de luna, preserva un fervor indomable que ella recordaba, así como la imagen de una tierra escarchada y un Orión esbelto en los cielos, con la estrella por debajo, al este. Pero ¡el nombre! ¡El nombre! Oyó hablar a Willoughby confusamente.

—Oh la vieja historia; otro esfuerzo; ya conoces mi deseo; un fracaso, desde luego, sin gratitud por ninguna parte. Supongo que debo pedirte excusas. Ninguno de ellos ve lo que les resulta bueno, señor.

—Es manifiesto, sin embargo —dijo el doctor Middleton—, si puedo opinar por la división de la que hemos oído hablar, que el padre está dispuesto a respaldar a su nominado.

—No puedo decirlo; hasta donde me concierne, es un lío.

Vernon resistió la incitación a asentir, pero brilló su reconocimiento del hecho.

—Tu intención era buena, Willoughby.

—Eso espero, Vernon.

—Pero la has ahuyentado.

—Hemos de resignarnos.

—A mí no me afecta, pues me marcho mañana.

—Ya ve, señor, la gratitud que obtengo.

—Señor Whitford —dijo el doctor Middleton—, tiene usted una torre de fortaleza en el padre de la dama.

—¿Me permitirá que lo traslade a la dama, señor?

—¿Por qué no?

—¿Que su matrimonio sea una cuestión de obediencia a su padre?

—Ay amigo mío, un amante vigoroso la obtendría en esos términos, sabiendo que es por bien de la dama. ¿Qué dice usted, Willoughby?

—¡Señor! ¿Decir? ¿Qué puedo decir? La señorita Dale no se ha comprometido. Si lo hubiera hecho, es una dama que no deshonraría su compromiso.

—Es un ideal de constancia, que se atendría a su compromiso aunque la otra parte lo rompiera —dijo Vernon mientras Clara se estremecía.

—Lo considero, señor, una estatua de constancia, en comparación con la cual una dama de carne y hueso se proclamaría graduada en la condición de la idiocia —dijo el doctor Middleton.

—Pero la confianza es la confianza, señor.

—Pero lo roto, roto está, señor, ya sea porcelana o compromisos humanos, y todo cuanto puede hacer el que sigue siendo fiel o, debería decir, el que queda lleno de pesar, es dedicar el resto de su vida a recoger los fragmentos; una ocupación apropiada para quien, en beneficio de la humanidad, se encuentre encerrado en un asilo.

—Destruye usted la poesía del sentimiento, doctor Middleton.

—Para vigorizar la poesía de la naturaleza, señor Whitford.

—Entonces convendrá, señor, que, cuando alguien traiciona la confianza, el compromiso desaparece y el otro es absolutamente libre.

—Convengo. Soy el campeón de ese lugar común y hago sonar ese toque para el mundo sentimental. Puesto que ha elegido usted defenderlo, apelaré a Willoughby y le preguntaré si no se pone al lado del mundo de buen sentido al aplaudir las bodas de un hombre o doncella que se casan al mes de haber sido plantados.

Clara deslizó su brazo por debajo del de su padre.

—Poesía, señor —dijo Willoughby—. Nunca he sido tan hipócrita para fingir que la entiendo ni que me preocupa.

El doctor Middleton se rio. También Vernon parecía admirar a su primo por una respuesta que sonó en los oídos de Clara como la más torpe que se hubiera pronunciado. Su brazo se quedo frío bajo el de su padre. Volvía a temer a Willoughby.

Willoughby dependía por completo de su agilidad para eludir los empujones que lo acosaban. Si hubiera creído en la traición de los poderes superiores, habría visto enseguida un propósito en esos golpes mortales, pues sus sentimientos no habían sido nunca más agudos que en la crisis por la que pasaba; se habría llevado a Clara para discutir con ella, confiando en que Vernon, por amistad, no lo delataría a su padre; pero una discusión con Clara no prometía frutos inmediatos, ni nada agradable, y la confianza perdurable que ponía en sus genios tutelares oscurecía su inteligencia de manera que evidenciaba que, de otro modo, habría aceptado el lunar y confiado en la delicada susceptibilidad a las impresiones más suaves que lo habían herido. Clara podía haber escuchado detrás de la puerta; había podido oír lo suficiente para suscitar sospechas. Pero Vernon no había estado en casa la noche pasada; ella no había podido comunicárselo y él no había visto a Leticia, que era digna de confianza, una mujer admirable aunque boba y malhadada.

Prefiriendo considerar a Vernon un moralista pragmático que se aprovechaba de un zumbido sentencioso, juzgó pertinente separarlos y vencer a Clara mientras estaba abatida, como ella parecía estarlo antes de la llegada vejatoria de Vernon.

—Temo, amigo mío, que seas demasiado refinado y meticuloso para ser un buen pretendiente —dijo—. Es hermoso sobre el papel y absurdo en la vida. Tenemos algunos asuntos privados que discutir. Creo que entraremos, señor. Pronto lo liberaré.

Clara le apretó el brazo a su padre.

—¿Más? —dijo él.

—Cinco minutos. Hay un pequeño enredo que aclarar, señor. Querida Clara, lo verás con otros ojos.

—Papá desea trabajar con el señor Whitford.

Su corazón se hundió al oírle decir a su padre:

—No, es una mañana perdida. Debo consentir en pagar la tasa por darle otra joven al mundo. ¡Tengo una hija! Me compensará usted, señor Whitford, así lo espero, esta tarde. No desfallezca. He observado hace tiempo su aire meditabundo. No tendrá el cerebro claro mientras piense en esa cuestión. Me aventuraría a proponer hacer algún alegato a su favor si fuera necesario para resolver rápidamente el asunto.

Vernon se lo agradeció brevemente y dijo:

—Willoughby ha ejercido toda su elocuencia y ya ve el resultado: usted ha perdido a la señorita Dale y yo no la he ganado. Ha hecho todo cuanto un hombre puede hacer por otro en un asunto tan delicado, incluso repetir los famosos versos de cumpleaños que ella escribió para él para adular a la poetisa. Sus mejores esfuerzos fracasaron por la indisposición de la dama hacia mi persona.

—Fíjese —dijo el doctor Middleton, mientras Willoughby, electrizado por la mención de los versos, daba una o dos zancadas— en que tiene usted en él a un defensor que no retrocederá ante una negativa. Puedo afirmar que es tenaz, pertinaz como pocos. Así es. No creer en el *no* de una dama es el método adecuado de rendir esa fortaleza. Aunque incuestionablemente tener a un joven alegando a favor de nuestros intereses ante una dama contrarresta las objeciones. Estando Willoughby, sin embargo, notoriamente comprometido, ha de disfrutar de los privilegios de sus mayores.

—Como un hombre comprometido, señor, estaba al nivel de sus mayores al alegar a mi favor con la señorita Dale —dijo Vernon.

Willoughby paseaba y murmuraba. La providencia se había convertido en mítica en sus pensamientos, si no en maliciosa: el peligro de esa adoración es que el objeto adopte un aspecto alternativo cuando ya no parece útil.

—¿Vamos, señor? —dijo sin ser escuchado. Al reverendo doctor no le defraudó el paso de la ola.

—Como caballero honorable, fiel a su compromiso y deseoso de establecer a sus parientes, merece, a mi juicio, la estima de la dama y su gratitud cordial; un fracaso temporal no debe descorazonarlos, a pesar de la precipitada retirada de la dama de Patterne y su reclusión en su santuario en ocasión de su reciente visita.

—Suponiendo que hubiera tenido éxito —dijo Vernon, poniendo frenético a Willoughby—, ¿habría estado yo obligado a casarme?

Eso ofrecía al doctor Middleton materia para pensar.

—¿La propuesta no contaba con su aprobación?

—No.

—¿Admira usted a la dama?

—Respetuosamente.

—¿No siente inclinación por el matrimonio?

—Una pulgada de ángulo exageraría mi inclinación.

—¿Cuánto tiempo hemos de seguir oyendo este absurdo insufrible? —gritó Willoughby.

—Pero si el señor Whitford no ha sido consultado... —dijo el doctor Middleton, que quedó dominado por el inmediato tono de Willoughby—: Ayúdeme, señor. Ayúdame, mi buen amigo.

Ofreció su brazo a Vernon e hizo el gesto de dirigir su mano a Clara.

—¡Aquí está la señora Mountstuart! —exclamó ella.

Willoughby se quedó con la mirada perdida. ¿Era la irrupción de una amiga o de una enemiga? Dudó y se quedó petrificado entre la doble cuestión.

Clara había visto a la señora Mountstuart y al coronel De Craye separarse y ahora la gran dama navegaba sobre el césped como una barcaza real en un festival.

Parecía amistosa, pero amistosa con cualquiera, lo que siempre era escarcha para sir Willoughby, y terriblemente amistosa con Clara.

Al llegar junto a ella susurró:

—¡Noticias! ¡Maravilloso! No podía dar crédito a la insinuación de ayer. ¿Está satisfecha?

—Le ruego, señora Mountstuart, que aproveche la oportunidad de hablar con papá —susurró Clara a su vez.

La señora Mountstuart se inclinó ante el doctor Middleton, saludó a Vernon y flotó sobre Willoughby con «¿Es cierto? Pero ¿lo *es?* ¿Puedo creérmelo? ¿Lo ha conseguido? Mi querido sir Willoughby. ¿De verdad?»

El confundido caballero jadeaba en una balsa de náufrago en medio del mar.

Solo pudo ofrecer una sonrisa paralizada al asalto.

Su discreción intuitiva le aconsejó dar un paso atrás mientras ella decía. «¡Así es!», las palabras que

caen a plomo en nuestros misteriosos sondeos, y retrocedió aún más diciendo: «¿Madam?», en un tono que aconsejaba a la señora Mountstuart hablar bajo.

La señora Mountstuart recuperó su volubilidad, lo siguió en su retirada parcial y bajó la voz:

—¡Imposible imaginarlo como un hecho real! Siempre está usted lleno de sorpresas, pero ¡esta! ¡Esta! Nada más viril, nada más caballeroso podía hacerse: nada, nada que cambiara tanto una situación insostenible en un asidero conveniente para todos. Es lo que me gusta, es lo que amo: ¡el buen sentido! Los hombres son tan egoístas: no podemos persuadirlos de que sean razonables en esas situaciones. Pero usted, sir Willoughby, ha demostrado sabiduría y sentimiento: la combinación más rara en los hombres.

—¿Dónde lo ha...? —se las arregló para decir Willoughby.

—¿Oído? En los setos, los tejados, en todas partes. Todo el vecindario lo sabrá antes de que caiga la noche. Lady Busshe y lady Culmer vendrán enseguida y declararán que no esperaban otra cosa, no lo dudo. Yo no soy tan pretenciosa. Le pido excusas por el *Dos veces* mío de ayer. Aunque hiera mi vanidad, debería hacerme feliz confesar mi error: estaba al margen. No tuve en cuenta una adhesión fatal; pensaba que los hombres no eran capaces de ella. Pensaba que solo nosotras, las mujeres, éramos las únicas criaturas perseguidas por la fatalidad. ¡Es una fatalidad! Usted ha tratado de escapar, lo ha intentado. Y ella honrará su rendición final, mi querido amigo. Es gentil y muy inteligente, mucho; es devota de usted; será un entretenimiento excelente. La veo como una flor a la luz del sol. Se convertirá en una anfitriona perfecta. Patterne brillará bajo su reino: tiene usted mi garantía. Y también usted. Sí, usted florece cuando lo adoran. Debe ser adoración. Ha estado bajo una nube. Hace años dije que era un partido, cuando nadie suponía que usted condescendería. Lady Busshe dirá que era una pantalla y lo considerará una elevada sabiduría. El mundo estará con usted. Todas las mujeres lo estarán, salvo, por supuesto, lady Busshe, cuyo orgullo reside en profetizar, y muy pronto se alegrará de formar parte del grupo. Amigo mío, su más sincera y antigua admiradora lo felicita. No puedo contenerme; estaba obligada a derramarme. Ahora debo irme y hablar con el doctor Middleton. ¿Cómo lo ha tomado? ¿Se van?

—Está perfectamente —dijo Willoughby en voz alta, consternado.

Ella agradeció su corrección por precipitarse en una conversación en voz baja, aunque estaban suficientemente aislados de los demás. Para entonces se había unido el coronel De Craye y todos hablaban juntos... de él, sospechó horriblemente Willoughby.

¡Clara lo había dejado! ¡Se había ido! Pero Willoughby recordaba su juramento y volvió a jurar: ¡no con Horacio De Craye! Clara se había ido, la había perdido, se había hundido en las aguas del mundo de hombres rivales y Willoughby decidió que debía usar toda su fuerza para que no se la quedara aquel hombre: el falso amigo que lo había suplantado en el corazón superficial de Clara y podía, si tenía éxito, jactarse de haberlo hecho habiendo aparecido simplemente en escena.

Willoughby interceptó a la señora Mountstuart mientras salía con el doctor Middleton:

—¡Mi querida señora! Concédame un minuto.

De Craye se les unió, con el humor más amistoso en el rostro:

—Nadie como tú, Willoughby, para formar nuevos patrones en un caleidoscopio.

—¿Te gustan los juegos de palabras, Horacio? —respondió Willoughby, irritado por descubrir otro demonio secreto, y se apartó dos o tres pasos con el doctor Middleton para pedirle que se abstuviera de persistir en el asunto con Clara—. Hemos de hacerla feliz de la menor manera, señor. Ella ha de tener sus razones, las razones de una joven! —Se rio y dejó al reverendo doctor ensimismado bajo el arco de su elevado ceño de estupefacción.

De Craye sonrió furtiva y triunfalmente mientras ensombrecía una profunda inclinación de cabeza ante Clara, que daba a entender su absoluta devoción por su causa y el fruto presente de que ella fuera testigo de sus méritos.

Clara sonrió dulce, aunque vagamente. No ocultaba su intimidad.

—La batalla está ganada —dijo Vernon tranquilamente cuando Willoughby se había alejado unos pasos junto a la señora Mountstuart, y añadió:

—Espere ver al señor Dale aquí. Está al tanto.

Vernon y Clara intercambiaron una mirada, severa por parte de él en contraste con la suavidad de la de ella, y marcharon hacia la casa.

De Craye esperó una palabra o una mirada prometedora. Era paciente, confiaba en sí mismo y siguió.

Clara se cogió una vez más al brazo de su padre y dijo, con repentina brillantez:

—¡Sirio, papá!

El doctor lo repitió de la manera más profunda:

—¡Sirio! Está allí —y preguntó—: ¿Una escintila femenina de sentido en ello?

—Es el nombre de la estrella en la que estaba pensando, papá.

—Fue la estrella que observó el rey Agamenón antes del sacrificio en Áulide. ¿Pensabas en eso? Pero,

amor mío, Ifigenia mía, tú no tienes un padre que insista en sacrificarte.

—¿Le he oído decir que me complazcas, papá?

El doctor Middleton carraspeó.

—Verdaderamente la Estrella Perro causa estragos en muchas cabezas —respondió [59] .

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57 *Planguncula,* del griego πλαγγών, es un término de Cicerón para denotar una muñeca de cera.

58 Eufemismo para los azotes en el trasero.

59 En 1883, Meredith publicó en *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of the Earth* un soneto titulado *The Star Sirius (La estrella Sirio),* que evoca esta página de *El Egoísta:* «¡Brillante Sirio! Que, cuando Orión palidece / como un puntito a la luz de la luna, aún sigues viva, / con el jovial fervor del porte de un guerrero / que conserva en su corazón las huellas de la batalla: / la llama implacable y rauda sobreviene / y reduce el lustre de muchas, / pero a ti, estrella mía, y a ti en mí, se te ve / para mostrar cuál es la fuente divina y que prevalece. / A lo largo de muchas contemplaciones, a una con la noche divina, / te señalo mientras fijas la alegría en el fuego constante; / y la oscura Tierra ha vislumbrado tus rayos veloces, / cuyos impulsos de vida inspiran / el espíritu a la vida, la pasión por la luz, / desde que perdió de vista a su señor, / y ha sentido que la recorren como una lira».

XLIV

El doctor Middleton, las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel y el señor Dale

CLARA miró las nubes pasajeras. Viajaba con ellas ahora y saboreaba la libertad, pero se abstuvo prudentemente de molestar a su padre. Se mantuvo en reserva.

La campana del mediodía los convocó.

Pocos fueron los que hablaron durante la comida, pocos los que comieron. A Clara la impulsaba el deseo de estudiar el rostro de la señora Mountstuart. Willoughby estaba obligado a presidir la mesa. Fue la comida de una asamblea de mudos y platos, que impresionaban el oído como el sonido tan conocido de una colecta de ofrendas en la iglesia tras una exhortación persuasiva desde el púlpito. Una ocurrencia del coronel De Craye tuvo la acogida que se le da al grito sofocado de un expósito en el silencio del edificio sagrado. Willoughby intentó la política con el doctor Middleton, cuyo apetito regular lo preservó de las especulaciones desfavorables cuando se saciase; solo él honró la comida, contestando a su anfitrión:

—Los tiempos son malos, dice usted, y tenemos un gobierno que hace con nosotros los que quiere. Bueno, señor, siendo eso así y la oposición un modo de obligarlo a una mayor estabilidad, es el momento de que los hombres sensatos se retiren a sí mismos con la firme determinación de la semilla que crece en la tierra. Reposo en la naturaleza, dormir con toda confianza y tolerar las estaciones. Ese es mi consejo para el partido más débil.

El consejo era excelente, pero acabó con el tema.

El apetito del doctor Middleton era vigilado como señal para levantarse y respirar libremente, y tal es la gracia concedida a un buen hombre de conciencia tranquila, dedicado a cumplir su deber para sí mismo, que no percibió nada de la inquietud general. Pasó por la comida en calma y con la misma calma citó a Milton a las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel cuando la compañía se levantó enseguida que hubo terminado el postre. Willoughby se llevó a Vernon. La señora Mountstuart hizo señales encubiertas a Clara.

Willoughby debía tener algo que decirme, pensó el doctor Middleton: su posición no era clara. Pero la situación no era desagradable y no tenía demasiada prisa, aunque deseaba que lo ilustraran.

—Este —les dijo el doctor Middleton a las tías solteras mientras las acompañaba al salón— no será un día perdido para mí si puedo dedicarles a ustedes lo que queda de él.

—El trueno, tememos, no está lejos —murmuró una.

—Tememos que sea inminente —suspiró la otra.

Se pusieron a salmodiar alternativamente.

—Estamos acostumbradas a examinar detenidamente a nuestro Willoughby y lo conocemos por una sombra.

—Desde su infancia a su gloriosa juventud y su vida adulta.

—Siempre ha sido el alma de la caballerosidad.

—El deber: primero el deber. La felicidad de su familia: el bienestar de los que dependen de él.

—Orgulloso de su nombre, aunque no sea un orgullo premeditado; se basa en la posesión consciente de cualidades excelsas.

—Puede ser humilde si la ocasión lo requiere.

El doctor Middleton asintió a la letanía, sintiendo que la ocasión requería de él la humildad.

—Esperemos... —dijo, sin asumir la penitencia debida a su inescrutable hija.

Las señoritas insistieron.

—Vernon Whitford, que no es de su sangre, ¡es su hermano!

—¡Mil ejemplos! Leticia Dale los recuerda mejor que nosotras.

—¡Cualquier golpe podría afectarle!

—¡Que haya otro esperándolo!

—¡Parece imposible que se le entienda tan mal!

—Esperemos... —dijo el doctor Middleton.

—¡No es pedir demasiado que al dispensador de la bondad se le respete!

—Cuando era niño se subió un día a una silla y allí se quedó, peligrosamente, sin dejar que lo sujetáramos, porque era más alto que nosotras, y tuvimos que contemplarlo. ¿Te acuerdas de él, Eleanor? *¡Soy el sol de la casa!* ¡Era inimitable!

—¡Nuestros sentimientos! ¡Tendría nuestros sentimientos! Tenía catorce años cuando su prima Grace

Whitford se casó y lo perdimos. Habían sido los mayores amigos y pasó mucho tiempo antes de que apareciera entre nosotros. No se ha preocupado por verla desde entonces.

—Pero se hizo amigo de su marido. Nunca ha dejado de ser generoso. Su única falta es...

—Su sensibilidad. Y ese es...

—Su secreto. Y eso...

—¡No lo descubras! Ocurre lo mismo con él ahora, adulto. Nadie acusará a Willoughby Patterne de un defecto de masculinidad, pero ¿qué es eso? Sufre, como nadie ha sufrido, si no es amado. Él es inalterablemente constante en afecto.

—Lo que nadie podría decir. Hemos vivido con él toda su vida y sabemos que está dispuesto a hacer cualquier sacrificio: solo que exige el corazón a cambio. Sin duda, su aspecto es el que tenía hoy.

—Trastornado: como no lo habíamos visto nunca.

—Esperaremos —dijo el doctor Middleton, esta vez apresurándose. Lo acuciaba decir «Lo que sea»: tenía que resolver la perplejidad en sus indagaciones. Adoptando un discurso familiar apropiado al tema dijo:

—Ya saben, señoritas, que nosotros, los ingleses, provenimos de una cepa ruda. Una dosis de rudeza en nuestra juventud no nos perjudica, nos refuerza. De otra manera es probable que nos sintamos fríos: crecemos demasiado finos donde el vendaval zarandea una estatura tenue, es decir, en nuestro amor propio. Somos bárbaros en un suelo forzado a la riqueza, en un conservatorio de seguridad confortable, pero bárbaros. Así, ya ven, brillamos cuando nos arrancan de ahí y nos llevan donde sopla con fuerza el viento, en un estado de guerra. En un estado de guerra nos sentimos como en casa, nuestros hombres se muestran magnánimos. Escipiones y buenos legionarios. En el estado de paz no vivimos en paz; nuestra rudeza nativa estalla en lugares inesperados con aspectos extraordinarios: tiranías, extravagancias, exacciones domésticas y, si no hemos tenido un adiestramiento avezado antes... dentro y fuera... el instrumento pasado de moda de la isla para taladrarnos la civilización de nuestros maestros, los antiguos, mostramos esa rudeza aquí y allá con exceso. Ejem. Sin embargo», añadió el reverendo doctor, abandonando su esfuerzo por decir una poderosa verdad de manera oscura para la comprensión de las refinadas solteronas, cuya sobreabundancia en Inglaterra era en su opinión la causa de nuestra decadencia como pueblo, «sin embargo, no he observado esa ultrasensibilidad en Willoughby. Ha tenido que oír más de lo que yo, que desde luego no soy un ejemplo de fragilidad, habría podido soportar.

—Lo oculta —dijeron las señoritas—. Es intenso.

—¿Es una enfermedad, entonces?

—No se puede explicar; es místico.

—Es un culto, entonces, una forma de adoración de sí mismo.

—¡De sí mismo! —exclamaron ambas—. Pero ¿no es eso indiferente a los demás? ¿Es eso lo que anhela simpatía, amor y devoción?

—Es un anfitrión admirable, señoritas.

—Es admirable en todos los aspectos.

—Ha de ser admirable quien ha impresionado de una manera tan favorable a mujeres capaces de discernimiento, sus compañeras de toda la vida. Repito que es un anfitrión perfecto.

—Será un perfecto marido.

—Con toda probabilidad.

—Es una certeza. Amado y obedecido, será guiado. Ese es el secreto para aquella a la que ama de una manera tan fatal. Si nos hubiéramos atrevido, se lo habríamos insinuado a ella. Lo gobernará amándolo y, a través de él, todo cuanto tenga que ver con ella. No será una regla a la que él se someta, sino un amor que acepta. ¡Si ella se diera cuenta!

—¡Si ella fuera metafísica! —suspiró el doctor Middleton.

—Pero una sensibilidad tan aguda como la suya podría...

—Constreñida por una compañera carente de simpatía...

—Al final lo será, pues lo mejor de nosotros es mortal...

—¡Insensible

—Tal vez se sienta...

—¡O más!

—Él seguiría siendo tierno...

—¡Pero podría endurecerse!

Las dos señoritas miraron al doctor Middleton al revelar la terrible perspectiva.

—Es la historia de la sensibilidad —dijo, triste como ellas.

Los tres se mantuvieron cabizbajos: las señoritas en un intento de digerir su observación; el reverendo doctor para que su galantería no chocara con su buen sentido.

Lo rescataron.

La puerta se abrió y el lacayo anunció al señor Dale.

La señorita Eleanor y la señorita Isabel se hicieron una a otra una señal para levantar las manos.

Avanzaron hacia él y le dieron la bienvenida.

—Siéntese, por favor, señor Dale. ¿No nos traerá malas noticias de nuestra Leticia?

—Es tan raro el placer de darle la bienvenida, señor Dale, que nos alarma cuando, como confiamos, ha de ser motivo de una congratulación sin mezcla.

—¿Ha hecho maravillas el doctor Corney?

—Estoy en deuda con él por traerme a su casa, señoritas —dijo el señor Dale, un caballero enjuto y abotonado, con una tez india mortificada por el lecho de enfermo—. Es insólito en mí salir de mi recinto.

—El reverendo doctor Middleton.

El señor Dale se inclinó. Parecía sorprendido.

—Vive usted en una atmosfera espléndida, señor —observó el reverendo doctor.

—Apenas puedo aprovecharla, señor —respondió el señor Dale. Les preguntó a las señoritas:

—¿Está libre sir Willoughby?

Las señoritas hicieron una consulta.

—Está con Vernon. Enviaremos a buscarlo.

Tocaron la campana.

—He tenido la gratificación de conocer a su hija, señor Dale, una dama de lo más estimable —dijo el doctor Middleton.

El señor Dale asintió.

—Sus alabanzas la honran, señor. Hasta donde sé, hablo como padre, las merece. Hasta ahora no he tenido dudas.

—¿De Leticia? —exclamaron las señoritas, hablando de ella como de la gentileza y la bondad encarnadas.

—Hasta ahora he pensado devotamente así —dijo el señor Dale.

—Es la más dulce de las enfermeras y la más devota de las hijas.

—Hasta donde concierne al deber con su padre, puedo decir que lo es, señoritas.

—¡En todas sus relaciones, señor Dale!

—Esa es mi plegaria —dijo.

Apareció el lacayo. Anunció que sir Willoughby estaba en el laboratorio con el señor Whitford y que la puerta estaba cerrada.

—Asuntos domésticos —observaron las señoritas—. Ya conoce la diligente atención de Willoughby, señor Dale.

—¿Se encuentra bien? —preguntó el señor Dale.

—Su salud es excelente.

—¿En cuerpo y en mente?

—Pero, señor Dale, nunca se pone enfermo.

—¡Ah! Lo oye alguien que nunca está bien. Y el señor Whitford ¿está sano?

—¿Sano? La pregunta me alarma por mí mismo —dijo el doctor Middleton—. Sano como nuestra constitución, el crédito del país, la reputación del príncipe de nuestros poetas. Le ruego que no tema por él.

El señor Dale aspiró levemente como un hombre sumido en la perplejidad.

Dijo:

—El señor Whitford trabaja con la cabeza. Es un estudiante severo. No siempre, si puedo decirlo así, se encuentra a gusto con los asuntos mundanos.

—Rechace esa leyenda difamatoria del estudiante, señor Dale, y acepte mi palabra de que quien trabaja persistentemente con su cabeza está al tanto de todos los asuntos.

—¡Ah! Su hija, señor, ¿está aquí?

—Mi hija está aquí, señor, y será muy feliz de presentarle sus respetos al padre de su amiga, la señorita Dale.

—¿Son amigas?

—Amigas muy cordiales.

El señor Dale volvió a aspirar débil y apaciguadoramente.

—¡Leticia! —suspiró en apóstrofe, y se despejó la frente con una mano temblorosa.

Las señoritas le preguntaron ansiosamente si le disgustaba el calor de la habitación y le ofrecieron un frasco de sales.

El señor Dale les dio las gracias.

—Puedo resistir hasta que venga sir Willoughby.

—Tememos molestarlo cuando su puerta está cerrada, señor Dale, pero, si lo desea, podemos aventurar

un mensaje. ¿De verdad no trae malas noticias de Leticia? Nos dejó apresuradamente esta mañana, sin despedirse, salvo una palabra a una de las doncellas respecto a que las condiciones de usted requerían su presencia inmediata.

—¡Mis condiciones! ¡Leticia no me abre la puerta! Hemos hablado a través de la puerta, eso es todo. Estoy enfermo y estupefacto ante dos puertas cerradas, ninguna de las cuales se abre, al parecer, para darme una explicación que necesito más que la medicina.

—¡Apreciado señor! —exclamó el doctor Middleton—. Me ha impresionado la descripción de su situación, señor Dale. Podría aplicarse perfectamente a la humanidad de la presente generación y, si yo tuviera que sermonear en estos días, podría decir que me proporcionarían una ilustración para el púlpito. Por mi parte, cuando las puertas están cerradas no trato de abrirlas y atribuyo mi perfecta ecuanimidad, incluso mi salud, a una aceptación sin preguntas del hecho de que estén cerradas para mí. Leo mi página a la luz de la que dispongo. Por el contrario, al mundo de hoy, si puedo presumir de citarlo a usted a propósito, se le oye llamando a esas dos puertas cerradas del secreto de las cosas a cada lado de nosotros y puede vérselo enfermo y estupefacto porque no obtiene respuesta a su llamada. Bueno, señor, que el mundo compare las fortunas diversas del mendigo y el cartero: llame para dar y se abrirán; llame para pedir y seguirá cerrada. Lleve una carta a su puerta cerrada y tendrá una buena acogida; pero no hay ninguna que repartir. Por esa razón...

El señor Dale se limpió la frente sudorosa y extendió su mano en un gesto de súplica.

—Soy un inválido, doctor Middleton —dijo—. Soy incapaz de manejarme con las analogías. Solo tengo fuerza para la lenta digestión de los hechos.

—En cuanto a los hechos, somos dispépticos, señor. Aún no sabemos si la naturaleza es un hecho o un esfuerzo por dominar un hecho. El mundo no ha asimilado el primer hecho sobre el que se basa. Aún estamos esforzándonos por hacer buena sangre del hecho de nuestro ser.

Presionándose las sienes con las manos, el señor Dale se lamentó:

—Me da vueltas la cabeza. No ha sido sensato salir. He venido siguiendo un impulso, confío en que honorable. No me encuentro bien; no puedo seguirlo, doctor Middleton. Perdóneme.

—Déjeme decirle, señor, por mi experiencia con mis paisanos, que, si usted no me sigue, y puede abstenerse de abusar de mí, es usted magnánimo —respondió el reverendo doctor, poco dispuesto a dejar marchar al hombre que había encontrado para que lo indemnizara por su galante servicio de asentir sin rechistar a las señoritas, aunque sabía que su vigor era como el viento del este para unos nervios débiles y él mismo una máquina de castigar cuando lo apartaban un día de sus libros.

La señorita Eleanor dijo:

—¿Necesita usted ilustración, señor Dale? ¿Podemos ilustrarlo nosotras?

—Creo que no —respondió el señor Dale sin fuerzas—. Creo que esperaré a sir Willoughby... o al señor Whitford. Si logro conservar mis fuerzas. ¿Podría intercambiar —temo desfallecer— dos palabras con la joven que es, era...?

—¿La señorita Middleton, mi hija, señor? Está a su disposición. Le diré que venga.

El doctor Middleton se detuvo ante la ventana.

—Ella, es cierto, conoce mejor que yo a la señorita Dale. Pero tengo para mí que yo conozco mejor al caballero. Espero, señor Dale, dirigiéndome a usted como padre de la dama, que me considere usted un abogado persuasivo y vehemente de sus intereses.

El señor Dale estaba confuso. El árbol joven azotado por una ráfaga cae como lo hizo él.

—¿Abogado? —dijo. Apenas tenía aliento.

—Su vehemente abogado, repito, pues tengo la opinión más elevada de él. Ya ve, señor, que estoy familiarizado con las circunstancias. Creo —dijo el doctor Middleton volviéndose a las señoritas— que debemos, hasta que sus poderosas inducciones, señor Dale, se unan a mis ejemplos, superando los escrúpulos femeninos que pueda haber, considerar que las circunstancias no son públicas en general. Podemos atribuirle timidez a nuestro Estrefón [60] . Pero saber si, por el momento, eso tiene importancia para nosotros, en consideración a las partes, para no ser nominalmente precisos, no es un requisito en esta casa. Ahora mismo alega indiferencia a la cuestión. Me imagino que comprendemos esa fase de la frigidez amatoria. Francamente, señor Dale, yo mismo fui rechazado una vez en la vida por una dama y no me indigné, sino que me mostré indiferente al vínculo matrimonial.

—¿Mi hija lo *ha* rechazado, señor?

—Temporalmente podría parecer que ha rehusado la proposición.

—¿Él era libre...? ¿Podía honorablemente...?

—Su mejor amigo y más cercano pariente es una garantía para usted.

—Lo sé; lo he oído; me han informado al respecto; he oído hablar de la proposición y que él podía plantearla honorablemente. Sin embargo, estoy indefenso, no puedo moverme hasta obtener una seguridad de

que las razones de mi hija son las que un padre no necesita subrayar.

—¿Tal vez se equivoque la dama?

—No la he visto esta mañana; me he levantado tarde. He oído un relato asombroso de la causa de su partida de Patterne y me he encontrado con su puerta cerrada y sin respuesta.

—No tendrá razones que dar y teme que se las pidan.

—¡Señoritas! —exclamó dolorosamente el señor Dale.

—¡Adivinamos el secreto, lo adivinamos! —exclamaron las señoritas, sonrientes ante la mirada del doctor Middleton.

—¿No tendrá razones que dar?

El señor Dale repitió lentamente las palabras para comprenderlas.

—Entonces, señor, ¿sabe que usted no se opone?

—Sin duda, por mi elevada estima del caballero, debe saber que no me opongo. Pero ella no me considera a mí lo principal. No puede haber imaginado que yo sea un obsáculo. Solo soy el amigo del caballero. Un amigo celoso, permítame añadir.

El señor Dale tendió una mano implorante; era demasiado para él.

—Perdóneme; mi cabeza es un desastre. ¿Su hija opina lo mismo, señor?

—No lo hemos examinado estrechamente, pero podría decir que mi hija opina lo mismo, señor. Y también, ¿puedo añadirlo?, estas señoritas.

El señor Dale dio a entender que estaba saturado.

—¿Dónde estoy? ¿Y Leticia lo rechazó?

—Temporalmente, suponemos. ¿No depende en parte de usted, señor Dale?

—Pero ¡qué cosas tan extrañas han sucedido desde que mi hija salió de mi casa! —exclamó el señor Dale, delatando un elixir en sus venas—. Podría reírme si no temiera que me considerasen loco. ¿Ella rechazó su mano estando él en libertad para ofrecerla? ¡Mi hija! ¿Estamos en nuestros cabales? Los cuentos de hadas eran ciertos y las lecciones de los libros estaban equivocadas. Pero realmente, realmente es desmoralizador. Un inválido (y yo lo soy y ninguna excitación momentánea podría tomarse por lo contrario) se inclina a la idea de estabilidad, de orden. La menor perturbación del curso acostumbrado de las cosas lo desestabiliza. ¡Lo había profetizado durante años! Y durante años lo había tenido todo en contra y ahora, cuando se confirma, me asombro de no considerarme un necio.

—Y durante años, querido señor Dale, esa unión, a pesar de la corriente en contra y las disposiciones humanas, ha sido la preocupación constante de nuestro Willoughby —dijo la señorita Eleanor.

—Su propósito más querido —dijo la señorita Isabel.

—Yo no he mencionado el nombre —dijo el doctor Middleton—. Pero está a la vista, y tal vez sea mejor que lo esté, si hemos de evitar el riesgo de las mistificaciones. No creo que estemos traicionando seriamente la confianza, aunque él habría podido mencionárselo antes a usted. Willoughby me ha dicho que anoche apeló a su hija, señor Dale, no por primera vez, si lo entendí correctamente, sin éxito. Está desesperado. Yo no: suponiendo, claro, que usted nos ayude. No estoy desesperado porque el caballero es un caballero de valía, de valía reconocida. Usted lo conoce lo suficiente como para dar eso por sentado. Le traeré a mi hija para que me ayude a cantar sus alabanzas.

El doctor Middleton salió al césped por la puerta vidriera a buen paso, rebosante de la felicidad que se sentía encargado de conferir a su amigo el señor Whitford.

—¡Señoritas! Esto supera cualquier asombro —dijo con la voz entrecortada el señor Dale.

—La generosidad de Willoughby supera cualquier asombro —dijeron ellas a coro.

Se abrió la puerta y anunciaron a lady Busshe y a lady Culmer.

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60 Estrefón, por el pastor que se lamenta al principio de la *Arcadia* de Philip Sydney, es el nombre por antonomasia del enamorado.

XLV

Las señoritas Patterne, el señor Dale, lady Busshe y lady Culmer, con la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson

LADY Busshe y lady Culmer entraron mirando a derecha e izquierda. Al ver al señor Dale en la habitación, lady Busshe murmuró a su amiga:

—¡Confirmación!

Lady Culmer murmuró:

—Corney es del todo fiable.

—El tipo es su mejor tónico.

—Es inestimable para el país.

Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel les dieron la bienvenida.

La afabilidad de las señoritas Patterne, combinada con su eclipse total sobre su ilustre sobrino, invitó a las emprendedoras mujeres de mundo a tomarse libertades, y no eran ingenuas.

Lady Busshe dijo:

—¿Bien? ¡Noticias! Tenemos el esbozo. No se sorprendan; conocemos los puntos esenciales; hemos oído el disparo. Podría habérselo dicho ayer. Lo *vi* . Y lo adiviné el día anterior. ¡Oh! Ahora creo en las fatalidades. Lady Culmer y yo estamos de acuerdo en la opinión: es la más sencilla. Bien, ¿están ustedes satisfechas, queridas?

Las señoritas hicieron una mueca de interrogación:

—¿Con qué?

—¡Con ello! ¡Con todo! ¡Con ella! ¡Con él!

—¿Nuestro Willoughby?

—¿Será posible que requieran una dosis de Corney? —le dijo lady Busshe a lady Culmer.

—Interpretan la discreción perfectamente —dijo lady Culmer—. Pero, queridas, estamos en el secreto.

—¿Cómo se lo ha tomado ella? —susurró lady Busshe—. Nada de altos vuelos y alharacas, espero. Estaba bien relacionada, dicen, aunque no entiendo qué quieren decir con lo de un linaje de eruditos: parece una serie de delantales. Era hermosa. Eso es suficiente al principio. No resistirá frente al cerebro. Tenía a las dos en casa para contrastarlas y... ¡el resultado! Una joven con sesos, en una casa, derrota a todas nuestras bellezas. Lady Culmer y yo somos de esa opinión. Él pensó que ella era una pareja deliciosa para un baile y la encontró más bien tediosa al final del galope. Lo vi ayer, tan claro como la luz del día. Ella no lo ha entendido y él la ha entendido a ella. Ese será nuestro informe.

—Es joven; aprenderá —dijeron las señoritas con incomodidad, pero sin saber en modo algún lo que lady Busshe quería decir.

—Ustedes son caritativas, como siempre aquí. Recuerdo que tuvieron una palabra de amabilidad para aquella muchacha, Durham.

Lady Busshe cruzó la habitación hacia el señor Dale, que pasaba las hojas de un gran libro de divisas heráldicas de nuestras grandes familias.

—Estúdielo —dijo—, estúdielo, mi querido señor Dale; está usted en ello en virtud de poseer una hija inteligente y educada. En la página 300 encontrará usted el blasón de los Patterne. Y, atiéndame, ella lo llevará a usted a la nobleza antes de que lo haga, relativamente, ya sabe. Sir Willoughby y su esposa no se contentarán con sentarse y manejar la hacienda. ¿No tiene Leticia una ambición inmensa? Merecidamente, diría yo.

El señor Dale trató de decir algo. Cerró el libro, examinó la encuadernación, tamborileó en la cubierta con un dedo, esperaba que su señoría tuviera salud, aludió a la suya y a la extrañeza del pájaro fuera de la jaula.

—Probablemente resida usted aquí, en una jaula más grande y holgada, señor Dale.

El señor Dale sacudió la cabeza.

—¿Entiendo...? —dijo.

—Yo *sé* —dijo ella.

—Querida, ¿puede ser?

El señor Dale elevó la mirada con la sensación de quien se despierta tarde para ver un mundo vivo a plena luz del día.

Lady Busshe bajó la voz. Se tomó la libertad permitida con alguien en una posición inferior, mientras lo

trataba con un tono de familiaridad en reconocimiento de su esperado ascenso, en lo que consiste la buena crianza o la exacta medida de los deberes sociales.

—Leticia será feliz, puede estar seguro. Me encanta ver una larga y fiel adhesión recompensada. ¡Es encantador! Es la historia del triunfo de la paciencia. ¡Muy por encima de Griselda! Ninguna mujer se avergonzará de señalar a lady Patterne. ¿Se muestra usted inseguro? ¿Tiene dudas? Déjeme oírlas, tan despacio como quiera. Pero no hay duda de la nueva dirección de la escena. Ninguna duda de la proposición. ¡Querido señor Dale! Un poco más alto. Usted está aquí porque... Por supuesto quiere ver a sir Willoughby. ¿Ella? No lo he captado. ¿Ella? Parece... dice usted...

Lady Culmer les dijo a las señoritas Patterne:

—Han debido de pasar un momento de inquietud. Estos asuntos llegan siempre a un clímax, salvo que la gente esté bien educada. Lo vimos venir. Naturalmente no esperábamos esa transformación de las prometidas, ¿quién habría podido? Si me hubiera parado a pensarlo, habría dado con ello. No me equivoco cuando me paro a especular. Soy más fría: las ideas acuden; no hay que forzarlas. Por eso soy más brillante en una pesada tarde de invierno, en el sofá, junto a mi servicio de té, que en ninguna otra estación. Sin embargo, sus problemas se han acabado. ¿Cuándo se han ido los Middleton?

—¿Se han ido los Middleton? —dijeron las señoritas.

—El doctor Middleton y su hija.

—No nos han dejado.

—¿Los Middleton están aquí?

—Están aquí, sí. ¿Por qué habrían de dejar Patterne?

—¿Por qué?

—Sí. Es probable que se queden unos días más.

—¡Cielos!

—No hay motivo para lo contrario, lady Culmer.

—¡No hay motivo!

Lady Culmer llamó a lady Busshe.

La sorprendida dama dio un grito.

—¡Lo ha rechazado!

—¿Quién?

—*¡Ella!*

—¿Ella? ¿A sir Willoughby?

—¡Rechazado! Declina el honor.

—¡Oh! ¡No! Eso lleva lo increíble más allá del romance. Pero ¿está él...?

—Por completo, al parecer. Ella recibió una petición formal y la rechazó.

—¡No y otra vez no!

—Querida, me lo ha dicho el señor Dale.

—Señor Dale, ¿cuál puede ser el significado de la conducta de su hija?

—Lady Culmer —dijo el señor Dale, no desagradablemente agitado por el interés que suscitaba, a pesar de su sorpresa por una discusión pública de la cuestión en la casa—, me encuentro a oscuras. Su padre debería saberlo, pero yo no. Su puerta estaba cerrada para mí. No la he visto. Estoy completamente a oscuras. Soy un recluso. He olvidado los modos del mundo. Suponía que ella debía dirigirse primero a su padre.

—Calle, calle. Los caballeros modernos no son tan formales; son criaturas de impulsos y se enorgullecen de ello. Ha hablado. Zanjemos eso. Pero ¿de dónde ha sacado usted ese cuento de un rechazo?

—Me lo ha contado el doctor Middleton.

—¡El doctor Middleton! —gritó lady Busshe.

—Los Middleton están aquí —dijo lady Culmer.

—¿En qué torbellino estamos? —Lady Culmer se levantó, dio dos o tres pasos y se sentó en otra silla—. ¡Oh! Atengámonos a un sistema. Si no, empezaremos a rabiar. Nos volveremos peligrosos. ¡Los Middleton están aquí y el propio doctor Middleton comunica al señor Dale que Leticia Dale ha rechazado la mano de sir Willoughby, que está ostensiblemente comprometido con su hija! Señor Dale, le ruego que nos diga cómo se lo contó el doctor Middleton. Calma. No hay prisa, aunque nuestra simpatía por usted y nuestro interés por las partes tal vez hagan que estemos un poco agitadas. Tómese su tiempo y díganoslo.

—Madam... Lady Busshe —el señor Dale notó un nudo en la garganta—. No veo razón por la que no pueda hablar. No veo cómo puedo haber sido engañado. Las señoritas Patterne lo oyeron. El doctor Middleton empezó, no yo. Yo era inconsciente, cuando llegué, de que lo había rechazado. Me habían informado de una proposición. Mi autoridad al respecto es completa. El objeto de mi visita era asegurarme de la integridad de la conducta de mi hija. Ella siempre ha tenido el sentido más alto del honor. Pero ya se sabe que la pasión confunde y la información era de lo más extraña. Temía que tuviéramos que disculparnos con el doc-

tor Middleton y su hija. Conozco el encanto que Leticia puede ejercer. Madam, con el lenguaje más sencillo, sin posibilidad alguna de que yo lo malinterpretara, el doctor Middleton habló de sí mismo como abogado del pretendiente de la mano de mi hija. Me da vueltas la cabeza. Supuse enseguida una ruptura amistosa entre sir Willoughby y la señorita Middleton o que la versión que me había llegado de su compromiso no fuera estrictamente precisa. Mi cabeza es débil. El lenguaje del doctor Middleton es una prueba para una cabeza como la mía, pero puedo hablar perfectamente de los puntos esenciales: habló de sí mismo como del abogado vehemente del pretendiente de la mano de mi hija. Esas fueron sus palabras. Entendí que trataba de que yo intercediera con ella. Mencionó el nombre. No hubo ocultación. Estoy seguro de que no puede haber un malentendido. Mis sentimientos se vieron afectados por su ansiedad respecto a la felicidad de sir Willoughby. Lo atribuyo a un sentimiento en el que no necesito detenerme. Abogado vehemente, dijo.

—Estamos en un torbellino perfecto —exclamó lady Busshe, dirigiéndose a todos.

—¡Un completo huracán! —dijo lady Culmer.

Una luz se encendió en los rostros de las señoritas Patterne. La intercambiaron entre sí.

Se habían quedado tan impresionadas que lady Busshe casi las había ofendido, pero su natural gentileza y habitual sumisión no les había permitido ser su igual en la tarea de hacerle frente.

—¿No es un malentendido —dijo la señorita Eleanor— que un cambio de nombres rectificará?

—No es en modo alguno la primera vez —dijo la señorita Isabel— que Willoughby ha abogado por su primo Vernon.

—Deploramos extremadamente el doloroso error en el que ha caído el señor Dale.

—Surge, nos damos cuenta ahora, de un malentendido completo del doctor Middleton.

—Pensaba en Vernon. Eso está claro para nosotras.

—Es imposible que pueda tratarse de Willoughby.

—Ya ven la imposibilidad, el error.

—¡Y los Middleton aquí! —dijo lady Busshe—. ¡Oh! Si nos quedamos a oscuras seremos el hazmerreír de todo el condado. Señor Dale, por favor, despierte. ¿Lo ve usted? Ha de estar confundido.

—Lady Busshe —despertó el señor Dale—, puedo haber entendido mal al doctor Middleton; usa un lenguaje que solo puedo comparar a una revista de campo del ejército. Pero he obtenido la historia de una autoridad que no puedo cuestionar y lo confirma la conducta sin precedentes de mi hija. Y si llego vivo al final del día mañana pareceré un fantasma.

—¡Querido señor Dale! —dijeron las señoritas Dale llenas de compasión.

Lady Busshe les murmuró:

—Ya saben que no estaban de acuerdo; no han salido adelante: lo vi; lo predije.

—Ella lo entenderá con el tiempo —dijeron las señoritas.

—Nunca. Mi creencia es que se han separado de mutuo acuerdo y que Letty Dale se lleva la palma al final. Sí, ahora lo creo.

Las señoritas mantuvieron su negativa, pero sabían demasiado para no sentirse perplejas y se delataban, aunque dijeron:

—¡Querida lady Busshe! ¿Es creíble? ¿Decentemente?

—¡Querida señora Mountstuart!

Lady Busshe invocó a su gran rival al aparecer entre ellas.

—Llega usted en el momento más oportuno. Nos encontramos en un estado de inextricable confusión, al borde del frenesí. Usted, y nadie más que usted, puede ayudarnos. Usted sabe, usted siempre sabe. Dependemos de usted. ¿Hay algo de verdad en ello? ¿Una partícula?

La señora Mountstuart se sentó majestuosamente.

—¡Ah! Señor Dale —dijo, inclinándose ante él—. Sí, querida lady Busshe, hay una partícula.

—¡No se burle de nosotras! Usted puede, tiene el arte. Yo tengo toda la historia, es decir, tengo una parte. Me refiero a que tengo las líneas generales. No puedo engañarme, pero usted puede llenarlas, sé que puede. Lo vi ayer. Ahora díganos, díganos. Ha de ser completamente cierto o absolutamente falso. ¿De qué se trata?

—Sea precisa.

—Usted la ha llamado a ella su fatalidad. Sí, yo era escéptica. Pero aquí lo tenemos todo otra vez y, si el cuento es cierto, habré de considerarla a usted infalible. ¿Él ha...? ¿Ella?

—Ambos.

—¿Y los Middleton aquí? No se han ido; conservan el campo. Y lo más sorprendente: ¡ella lo ha rechazado! ¡A lo que hay que añadir que el doctor Middleton ha intercedido con el señor Dale por sir Willoughby!

—¡El doctor Middleton ha intercedido!

Eso sorprendió a la señora Mountstuart.

—Por Vernon —enfatizó la señorita Eleanor.

—Por Vernon Whitford, su primo —dijo la señorita Isabel, con más énfasis aún.

—¿Quién —dijo la señora Mountstuart, elevando soberanamente la cabeza y dándole una inclinación— habla de rechazo?

—Me lo ha dicho el señor Dale —dijo lady Busshe.

—Me lo ha dicho, creo que con claridad, el doctor Middleton —dijo el señor Dale.

—Que Willoughby le propuso a Leticia a su primo Vernon, quiso decir el doctor Middleton —dijo la señorita Eleanor.

Su hermana la siguió:

—¡De ahí ese malentendido realmente ridículo! Triste, incluso —añadió, para tranquilizar al señor Dale —. Willoughby obró como apoderado de Vernon. Su primo, si no el primero de sus pensamientos, es siempre el segundo en él.

—Pero ¿podemos seguir?

—¡Qué discusión!

La señora Mountstuart les prestó una atención judiciaria. En el condado se las tenía como las más indulgentes de las personas insignificantes y, como lady Busshe, no se abstuvo del ardiente tema en su presencia. Dijo:

—Cada parte está en lo cierto y equivocada.

Lady Busshe dio un grito:

—¡Chillaré!

—¡Cruel! —gruñó lady Culmer.

—Mezclados, están todos ustedes equivocados. Por separado estarán en lo cierto. Sir Willoughby piensa en su primo Vernon, está ansioso por verlo establecido, es el autor de una propuesta a tal efecto.

—¡Lo sabemos! —exclamaron las señoritas Patterne—. Y Leticia rechazó al pobre Vernon una vez más.

—¿Quién habla de que la señorita Dale haya rechazado al señor Whitford?

—¿No lo ha rechazado? —preguntó lady Culmer.

—Está debatiéndose y decidiéndose en este momento.

—¡Oh siéntese, señor Dale! —le imploró lady Busshe, levantándose para devolverlo a su silla si era necesario—. Si nos descolocamos volveremos a quedarnos al margen. Hemos de mantenernos juntos si este enigma ha de ser interpretado. Querida señora Mountstuart, ¿habremos de decir, entonces, que no hay verdad en la otra historia?

—No tiene que decir nada de eso, querida lady Busshe.

—¡Sea misericordiosa! ¿Qué ocurre con la fatalidad?

—Tan segura como el polo para la aguja.

—¿No lo ha rechazado?

—Consulte su propia sagacidad.

—¿Aceptado?

—Espere.

—¡Todo el mundo por delante de mí! Señora Mountstuart, es usted un oráculo. En enigmas, si usted quiere, pero ¡hable! Si no tenemos el grano, denos las cáscaras.

—¿Alguno de nosotros puede anticiparse a los acontecimientos, lady Busshe?

—Sí. Creo que usted. Me inclino ante usted. Lo hago sinceramente. ¿Así que hay otra persona para el señor Whitford? Asiente usted. ¿Y nuestra Leticia es para sir Willoughby? Sonríe. ¿No me engaña? Un poco y yo correteando y aullando a su puerta. ¿Y el doctor Middleton en medio haciéndose el ciego? Y la otra persona es... ¡Ahora veo la luz! ¡Una ruptura amistosa y una nueva y suave disposición! Ella tiene dinero; no fue nunca la pareja de nuestro héroe, nunca; lo vi ayer, y antes, a menudo, y así la entrega él: tantarantán —Lady Busshe tamborileó una marcha en su rodilla—. ¿No es una conjetura inteligente? ¡La sombra de una pista para mí! Porque conozco la naturaleza humana. Un vistazo y veo la combinación en un minuto. Así él mantiene el dinero en la familia, se convierte en benefactor de su primo librándose de la muchacha y sucumbe a su fatalidad. Es una lástima que la deje subir y bajar como la marea tanto tiempo. El tiempo cuenta las mareas, ya sabe. Pero la historia mejora. Desafío a cualquier otro condado en el reino a que dé algo tan fresco y vivaz para igualarlo. Déjeme decirle que sospechaba del señor Whitford y que lo insinué ayer.

—¿De verdad? —dijo la señora Mountstuart con humor ante su excesiva agudeza.

—De verdad. Otra vez se ha puesto de pie nuestro buen hombre. Y parece agitado de nuevo.

El señor Dale se había visto obligado por la voz de la dama y su interés en el tema a escuchar. Había escuchado más que suficiente: estaba muy nervioso. Se apoyó en la silla, temeroso de perder la estabilidad y «¡Modales!», se dijo a sí mismo en voz alta sin darse cuenta, mientras pesaba en el libertino proceder con el que esas grandes damas acrisoladas del distrito discutían sobre su hija. Lo oyeron y no le hicieron caso. Supusieron, si lo hicieron, que se estaba amonestando a sí mismo. En ese momento sir Willoughby entró en el

salón por la puerta vidriera del jardín y simultáneamente el doctor Midleton por la puerta.

XLVI

La escena del generalato de sir Willoughby

La historia, nos tememos, no conocerá nunca las cualidades de liderazgo inherentes en sir Willoughby Patterne que lo habrían capacitado para el puesto de comandante de un ejército al ver que evitó las fatigas del servicio y prefirió los honores concedidos en su país a los administradores tranquilos de sus propios estados, pero su posesión de dones particulares, que son militares, y especialmente de una mentalidad proléptica, que es el sello y la garantía del general enviado por el cielo, se ponía de manifiesto en cada ocasión urgente cuando, en medio de dificultades que habrían superado a alguien menos alerta que él al aspecto amenazador del desastre, tenía que maniobrar.

No había recibido noticia de la presencia del señor Dale en su casa ni de la llegada de aquellas temibles mujeres, lady Busshe y lady Culmer: su puerta cerrada era un terror demasiado grande para sus criados. Habiendo terminado con Vernon, tras un tedioso esfuerzo por que se diera cuenta del sentido del paso que se le pedía que diera, salió al césped con el deseo de contemplar el inicio de una entrevista que no prometía demasiado y tal vez de aprovecharse de su fracaso. La señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, siguiendo sus indicaciones, había preparado a Clara, como él había preparado a Vernon. Sus deseos, cándida y amablemente expresados tanto a Vernon como a la señora Mountstuart, eran que, puesto que la muchacha parecía reacia a hacer de él un hombre feliz, podía hacer que lo fuera su primo. Habiéndole insinuado a la señora Mountstuart que sería más feliz sin ella, aludió al beneficio del dinero de la muchacha para el pobre Vernon, la salida general a un escándalo si el viejo Vernon se las arreglaba para atraparla mientras ella caía, la disposición armoniosa para todas las partes. Solo con la condición de que ella aceptara a Vernon consentiría en dejarla. Había dicho esto imperativamente, añadiendo que ese era el sentido de las noticias que ella había recibido en relación con Leticia Dale. Willoughby preguntó de dónde le habían llegado las noticias. La señora Mountstuart titubeó en su respuesta, hizo un gesto para dar a entender que estaban en el aire, que eran universales, y se centró en el arreglo propuesto. Willoughby no prestó atención a ninguno de los ejemplos mundanos de la señora Mountstuart de la locura de presionar a una muchacha que había mostrado su genio. La señora Mountstuart previó el fracaso. Willoughby no aceptó el consejo. Dijo: «Ese es mi plan», y tal vez el aspecto de boba benevolencia que lo rodeaba indujo a la dama a probar si había una oportunidad que tocara la locura que hay en nuestra naturaleza y tenía éxito de algún modo o llevaba a la pacificación. Sir Willoughby condescendió a disponer así las cosas por el bien de Clara; luego procedería a llevar a cabo sus propios planes. Ese fue el cariz. Podemos adoptar la apariencia que queramos ante el mundo hasta que nos descubran y el mundo no alabará la música hueca, pero el elogio que la señora Mountstuart hizo de la amabilidad de sir Willoughby y de su sencillez lo turbó, pues, aunque se había recuperado de su rechazo lo suficiente como para imaginar que Leticia no lo rechazaría si la presionaba reiteradamente, había permitido que se supusiera que era una doncella sumisa que anhelaba su elevación, y la creencia de la señora Mountstuart en ello le afligía con el recuerdo de su experiencia más amarga; no tenía completamente asegurado su apoyo. Además, suponiendo que fuera así, Willoughby consideraba qué clase de premio había ganado y un espasmo de odio absoluto a un mundo por el que hacemos poderosos sacrificios por los que recibimos a cambio una moneda gastada, de poco valor en comparación, turbaba las cuentas de sus ganancias. Es cierto que Leticia no había pasado por otras manos antes de llegar a él, como Vernon sabía que era el caso de Clara. El tiempo solo la había desgastado, pero el consuelo de la reflexión quedaba atenuado por el contraste físico de las dos. De ahí provenía la insólita melancolía de su tono que la señora Mountstuart juzgó conmovedora. Tenía sobre ella el efecto escénico que contribuye sobremanera a engañar el ingenio. Le habló de él a Clara como de un hombre que ha revelado una profundidad insospechada.

Vernon sintió curiosidad por la comunicación. Parecía más dispuesto a enamorarse de su benevolente pariente que de la dama. Estaba confuso, indisimuladamente conmovido; dijo que el plan era imposible, fuera de toda cuestión, pero le dio las gracias a Willoughby por la mejor de las intenciones; se lo agradeció efusivamente. Después de decir que el plan era imposible, el cómico erudito dejó que lo llevaran al césped a ver cómo había salido la señorita Middleton de su entrevista con la señora Mountstuart. Willoughby observó cómo se encontraba con la señora Mountstuart, que lo guió hasta donde ella se había despedido entre los arbustos y volvió a los espacios abiertos. Willoughby se apresuró a encontrarse con ella.

—Escuchará —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. Le gusta, lo respeta, cree que es un amigo muy sincero, inteligente, un erudito y un buen montañero, y cree que ha sido usted muy amable. Hasta ese punto he insisti-

do, pero no he hecho demasiado por el señor Whitford.

—Consiente en escuchar —dijo Willoughby, aferrándose a eso como el golpe mortal a su amigo Horacio.

—Consiente en escuchar porque usted lo ha dispuesto de tal manera que, si ella declinara, sería más bien una salvaje.

—¿Piensa que no tendrá resultado?

—Ninguno en absoluto.

—Que ella escuche lo tendrá.

—Y usted habrá de estar satisfecho con ello.

—Ya veremos.

—Cualquier cosa por la paz, dice, y no diría yo que un caballero dotado de lengua carezca de oportunidades. Ella quiere complacerlo a usted.

—El viejo Vernon no tiene lengua para las mujeres, ¡pobre! Somos arañas o moscas y, si un hombre no puede tejer una red, todo cuanto puede esperar es no caer en una. Ella sabe su historia también y eso no cuenta a su favor. ¿Qué aspecto tenía cuando los dejó?

—No tan brillante: como una pieza de porcelana que necesita que le quiten el polvo. Parecía un poco *gauche;* más como una muchacha de campo ruda que la criatura bien educada que es. No sospecho que guarde rencor. Recuerde, sir Willoughby, que ha obedecido sus deseos y hecho todo cuanto ha podido; creo que podríamos decir que ha rectificado y que se arrepiente si hemos de culparla, por lo que no debería usted insistir.

—Insisto —dijo.

—Benéfico, pero ¡un tirano!

—Bueno, bueno.

No le disgustaba el carácter.

Distinguieron al doctor Middleton paseando por el césped y Willoughby fue hacia él para desviarlo. La señora Mountstuart volvió al salón.

Willoughby dejó al reverendo doctor y se apostó en la enramada donde suponía que su ingenua pareja habría acabado de tartamudearse. ¿O habrían encontrado una palabra de armonía? Podía soportarlo, solo soportarlo. Sorteó los arbustos y miró, pero habían desaparecido. El emparrado decoraba el vacío. Su idea era que habrían descubierto enseguida su incapacidad para ser tórtolas y, deseando no perder un momento mientras Clara estuviera conmovida por la escena, Willoughby se apresuró al salón con la esperanza de iluminarla allí, atraerla y, en última instancia, urgente, apasionadamente, ofrecerle la única alternativa a lo que acababa de rechazar. ¿Por qué no había recurrido antes a la pasión, en lugar de renquear entre el temperamento y las conveniencias? Era capaz de ello: tan pronto como la imaginación le hizo concebir que sus sentimientos personales no estaban heridos ni en peligro, la fuerza de ello le inspiró una confianza heroica y Clara agradecida, Clara dulcemente conmovida, lo llevó a pensar en Clara derretida. Anticipándosela así se precipitó en el salón.

Un solo paso allí le advirtió que se encontraba en las fauces del mundo. La frase nos dice que un hombre es él mismo y las circunstancias que lo ponen a prueba. No hace falta decirlo de sir Willoughby: era tres veces él mismo cuando el peligro lo amenazaba, siendo él mismo su inspiración. Podía interpretar de un solo golpe de vista el ojo de Polifemo en la cabeza general de una compañía. Lady Busshe, lady Culmer, la señora Mountstuart, el señor Dale tenían un parecido en la variedad de sus expresiones que constituía un ojo gigante para él, perfecta aunque terriblemente legible. Discernió el hecho de que ese secreto demoníaco era amplio, universal. Lo atribuyó al hado. Estaba en las fauces del mundo, entre los dientes del mundo. Esta vez pensó que Leticia lo había traicionado e, inclinándose ante lady Busshe y lady Culmer, presionando elegantemente sus dedos y respondiendo a sus muestras de respeto y coqueterías, rumiaba su defensa antes de acercarse a su padre. No quería estar a solas con aquel hombre y consideraba la utilidad de su presencia.

—Me alegra verle, señor Dale, siéntese. ¿Es la naturaleza la que afirma su fortaleza o la eficacia de la medicina? Imagino que no pueden ser las dos cosas. ¿Nos ha traído de vuelta a su hija?

El señor Dale se sentó en una silla, incapaz de resistir la mano que lo obligaba.

—No, sir Willoughby, no. No la he traído; no la he visto desde que volvió a casa esta mañana desde Patterne.

—¿Es cierto? ¿No se encuentra bien?

—No sabría decirlo. Se ha recluido.

—Se ha encerrado —dijo lady Busshe.

Willoughby le dirigió una sonrisa. Los volvió íntimos.

Esa era una ventaja contra el mundo, pero quedaba expuesto ante aquella mujer abominable.

El doctor Middleton se acercó al señor Dale para disculparse por no presentarle a su hija Clara, a la que

no había podido encontrar ni dentro ni fuera de la casa.

—Tenemos en el señor Dale, como sospechaba —le dijo a Willoughby—, a un firme aliado.

—Si puedo solicitarle dos minutos, sir Willoughby —dijo el señor Dale.

—Sus visitas son demasiado raras para permitirme tasar los minutos —respondió Willoughby—. Creo que no podemos dejar escapar al señor Dale ahora que lo tenemos, doctor Middleton.

—No sin rescate —dijo el reverendo doctor.

El señor Dale sacudió la cabeza.

—Mis fuerzas, sir Willoughby, no me sostendrán tanto tiempo.

—Está usted en su casa, señor Dale.

—No lejos de casa, en realidad, pero demasiado lejos para un inválido que empieza a darse cuenta de su debilidad.

—Considere usted Patterne su casa, señor Dale —repitió Willoughby para que el mundo lo oyera.

—¿Incondicionalmente? —preguntó el doctor Middleton con un aire gracioso de disentimiento.

Willoughby lo miro con una fría cortesía y luego miró a lady Busshe. Ella asintió imperceptiblemente. Arqueó las cejas y Willoughby le correspondió con el gesto.

Traducidas, las señales decían así:

«Maldito sea el reverendo caballero. Lo veo a usted. ¿Es verdadera la historia que he oído? Tal vez errónea en algunos detalles».

Los grilletes que lo atenazaban estaban flojos.

Pero lady Busshe no se daría por satisfecha con el cumplido de las miradas y cabeceos íntimos. Pensó que aún podía estar por detrás de la señora Mountstuart y era osada, estaba ansiosa por Willoughby, medio enloquecida por el enigma de la olla que estaba hirviendo y apenas contaba con unos minutos.

No siendo extremadamente reticente por naturaleza, privilegiada por su situación e íntima suya por sus miradas encubiertas, se plantó delante de él.

—Una palabra para una vieja amiga. ¿Quién es el padre de la afortunada criatura? No sé cómo comportarme con ellos.

No tuvo tiempo de disgustarse con su vulgaridad y audacia.

Respondió, sintiendo que ella le apretaba las esposas:

—La casa estará vacía mañana.

—Ya veo. Una retirada decente y oculta. Nos han contado un cuento de ella escapándose para declinar el honor, me temo, o de su dignidad o algo parecido.

¿Cómo era posible que esa mujer estuviera dispuesta a aceptar la situación alterada de los asuntos de su casa si había recibido una insinuación al respecto? Willoughby olvidó que la había preparado en defensa propia.

—¿Quién se lo ha contado? —preguntó.

—Su padre. ¡Y las tías dicen que rechazó al primo!

A Willoughby le daba vueltas la cabeza. La enderezó para actuar y cruzó la habitación hasta las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel. Le zumbaban los oídos. ¡Él y toda su historia discutida en público! ¡Él mismo a techo descubierto! Y el asombro de que fuera él, entre todos los hombres, el que se viera envuelto en esa maraña, desnudo y golpeado, obligado a usar todas sus artes para ponerse a salvo y cubrirse, lo acuciaba como si el señor de su clase tuviera que atravesar el pasillo de una legión de duendes. Sentía los latigazos.

Las señoritas estaban hablando con la señora Mountstuart y lady Culmer de Vernon y la adecuación de Leticia a un erudito. Les hizo una señal y se levantaron.

—Es la hora de su paseo. ¡Vayan a la casa de campo! El señor Dale está enfermo. Ella debe venir. ¡Su padre enfermo! No tarden al ir ni al volver. Tráiganla enseguida.

—¡Pobre hombre! —suspiraron—. Willoughby —dijo una de ellas y la otra dijo:

—Hay un extraño malentendido que harías bien en corregir.

Estaban a punto de murmurar de qué se trataba. Él levantó la mano y, excusándose ante sus invitados, se retiraron obedientemente.

Le pidió a lady Busshe que se quedara y la dama se sentó junto a lady Culmer y la señora Mountstuart.

Lady Busshe le dijo a la gran dama:

—Usted ha probado a los eruditos. ¿Qué piensa?

—Excelentes, pero difíciles de mezclar —fue la respuesta.

—No hago nunca experimentos —dijo lady Culmer.

—¡Alguien debe hacerlos! —lamentó la señora Mountstuart recordando su aciaga cena.

Lady Busshe la consoló.

—En cualquier caso, la pérdida de un erudito no es una pérdida para el condado.

—Están bien para las ciudades —dijo lady Culmer.

—Estoy segura, además, de que hay que soportarlos.

—No tenemos nada que lamentar.

—Esa es mi opinión.

La voz del doctor Middleton, en coloquio con el señor Dale, se oyó como un melodioso trueno:

—¿Ante quién más he de presentarme como el abogado apasionado que proclamé ser ante usted, señor? Solo hay un hombre que yo conozca que me haga retroceder en esa ventura. Willoughby, únase a mí. Estoy informando al señor Dale...

Willoughby le tendió las manos al señor Dale para ayudarlo a ponerse de pie, aunque no había dado muestras de querer levantarse.

—¿No se siente bien, señor Dale?

—¿Parezco tan enfermo, sir Willoughby?

—Pasará. Leticia estará con nosotros en veinte minutos.

El señor Dale dio una palmada. Parecía alarmantemente enfermo y le reveló a satisfacción a su anfitrión cómo podía parecerlo.

—Le estaba diciendo al señor Dale que el pretendiente goza de nuestros concurrentes buenos deseos, los míos no menos que los suyos, Willoughby —observó el doctor Middleton, cuyas oleadas eran irrefrenables. Creía estar hablando en confianza—. Las damas están al cabo; gozan, diría, de la disposición natural a jugar con enigmas una y otra vez. La presión es un soberano específico. Pongámosla a prueba desde todos los radios del círculo. Se niega. Entonces me atrevo a proponerme a apelar yo mismo a ella. Mi hija siente seguramente una estima por el pretendiente que animará la lengua de una mujer en un caso como este. Las damas de la casa no se arredrarán. Al final, si es necesario, confiamos en que el padre de la dama ponga sus ejemplos. Mi prescripción es que se canse de sus negativas y, donde no hay una objeción arraigada, mantengo que es la recepta infalible para dirigir un asedio. Ninguna mujer puede decir que no siempre. La defensa no tiene recursos contra un solo asaltante y habremos resuelto el problema del movimiento continuo antes de que haya aprendido a negarse perpetuamente. Esa es mi postura.

Willoughby miró a la señora Mountstuart.

—¿Qué es eso? —dijo—. ¿Una traición a nuestro sexo, doctor Middleton?

—¡Creo haber oído que una mujer no puede decir que no siempre!» —señaló lady Busshe.

—A un caballero leal, madam: dando por supuesto que el campo de la petición recurrente no sea un terreno profanado; más bien consagrado a las afirmaciones.

El doctor Middleton fue atacado por tres abejas furiosas. Le hicieron decir sí y no alternativamente tantas veces que tuvo que admitir en los hombres una maleabilidad más dócil que la que suele atribuirse a las mujeres.

Willoughby gesticuló como un coro mudo al lado de las damas y una pequeña muestra del espíritu de partido como aquella, al recaer sobre su excitación al respecto, las puso afablemente de su parte.

Se llevó al señor Dale mientras el conflicto persistía con tiros de rifle e intervalos de cañón.

El señor Dale había dado señales de que estaba cada vez más inquieto bajo la carga de la duda.

—Sir Willoughby, tengo una pregunta. Le ruego que me lleve donde pueda plantearla. Sé que mi cabeza es débil.

—Señor Dale, quedó respondida cuando dije que mi casa es su hogar y que Leticia estará pronto con nosotros.

—Entonces ¡es cierta la historia!

—No sé nada de historias. Le he respondido.

—¿Puede mi hija ser acusada de alguna sombra de falsedad, de comportamiento deshonroso?

—Tan poco como yo.

El señor Dale escudriñó su rostro. No vio ninguna sombra.

—Me iría a la tumba en bancarrota si pudiera decirse eso de ella y aún no me he sentido pobre, aunque usted conoce la extensión de los ingresos de un pensionista. Entonces, ¿ese cuento de un rechazo...?

—Es absurdo.

—¿Ella ha aceptado?

—Hay situaciones, señor Dale, demasiado delicadas para darles una definición precisa.

—Ah sir Willoughby, pero le corresponde a un padre prever que su hija no se vea expuesta a situaciones delicadas. Espero que todo esté bien. Estoy confundido. Tal vez sea mi cabeza. Ella me deja perplejo. Usted no... ¿Puedo preguntárselo aquí? ¿Es usted libre? ¿Moderará usted mi ansiedad? Debe excusar mi debilidad.

Sir Willoughby le convenció, con un movimiento de la cabeza y una presión en la mano del señor Dale, de que él no y de que estaba libre.

—¿El doctor Middleton? —dijo el señor Dale.

—Nos dejará mañana.

—¿De veras? —El inválido puso una cara como si el vino se hubiera derramado sobre ella. Destrozó los cálculos de su anfitrión llamando al reverendo doctor—. ¿Vamos a perderlo, señor?

Willoughby trató de interponerse, pero el doctor Middleton irrumpió como el órgano señorial que acalla una flauta.

—No antes de contar mi victoria, señor Dale, y establecer a mi amigo en su trono adecuado.

—¿No se marcha usted mañana, señor?

—Ha oído usted decir, señor, que me voy mañana?

El señor Dale se volvió a sir Willoughby.

Sir Willoughby dijo:

—Clara dijo que hoy. Creo que es preferible mañana.

—¿Ah? —exclamó el doctor Middleton en voz alta, pero sin sombras. Irradiaba espléndidamente—. Sí, mañana entonces. Es decir, si sometemos a la dama.

Avanzó hacia Willoughby, tomó su mano, la estrechó, le dio las gracias, lo alabó. Habló en voz baja, con asombro, pero se le oyó decir:

—Estamos en deuda con usted para siempre, amigo mío —y estuvo soberbio, parecía sometido y dijo en voz alta:

—Aunque me gustaría ayudar a reducir esa fortaleza —dejando ver que se había librado de un peso.

El doctor Middleton dejó en parte estupefacto a Willoughby por su modo de tomárselo, pero su conducta era útil para permitirle la especulación sobre su disposición a terminar la partida. Era el punto de inflexión del compromiso.

Lady Busshe causó un revuelo.

—No puedo hacer esperar a mis caballos —dijo, haciéndole señas a sir Willoughby para que fuera junto a ella enseguida—. ¡Es usted admirable! ¡Perfecto! No me pida que me muerda la lengua. Me retracto, me desdigo. *Es* una fatalidad. Me decido por esa opinión. Puede usted resistir el disparo de la belleza, no del cerebro. Ese es nuestro dictamen. ¡Ahí está! Es delicioso sentir que el condado gana con usted. Nada de té. No puedo esperar. ¡Oh! Aquí viene. He de echarle un vistazo. ¡Mi querida Leticia Dale!

Willoughby se acercó enseguida al señor Dale.

—No debe excitarse, señor: mantenga la compostura. Mañana habrá recobrado las fuerzas. Está usted en su casa, en su propia casa; se encuentra usted en el salón de Leticia. Mañana se habrá aclarado todo. Hasta mañana nos expresaremos enigmáticamente por mutuo acuerdo. Siéntese, se lo ruego, Quédese con nosotros.

Saludó a Leticia y la rescató de lady Busshe; con el aire de un enamorado que dice «¡Mi dulce amor!», murmuró que había hecho bien en acudir y en acudir enseguida.

Su padre había sido relegado a la condición apropiada de un nerviosismo pegajoso para suscitar esa impresión. La ansiedad de Leticia era ostensible en sus largas pestañas cuando se inclinó sobre su silla.

Apareció entonces el doctor Corney y su nombre tuvo un efecto tonificante sobre el señor Dale.

—Corney ha venido a llevarme a casa —dijo—. Me avergüenza esta exhibición pública de mí mismo, querida. Vámonos. Me da vueltas la cabeza.

El doctor Corney había sido interceptado. Se separó de sir Willoughby con una docena de breves asentimientos a haberlo entendido, incluso más allá de la muestra de sus comunicaciones. Le tomó ligeramente el pulso a su paciente, suspirando de vez en cuando con una compostura profesional, y dijo:

—Descanso. No debe moverse. No, no, no es nada serio —para apaciguar los temores de Leticia—, «pero descanso, descanso. Un cambio de residencia por una noche le sentará bien. Le daré una dosis de su medicina esta tarde. Sí, sí, traeré todo lo necesario de la casa para usted y para él. Reposo según la previsión de Corney.

—¿Está usted seguro, doctor Corney? —dijo Leticia, preocupada por su padre y por sí misma.

—¿Qué orientación será la apropiada para la habitación del señor Dale? —preguntaron las hospitalarias señoritas Eleanor e Isabel.

—Sudeste, sin duda; que tenga el sol de la mañana, un aire cálido, un aire vigoroso y un aire brillante, y el paciente se despertará y cantará en su cama.

Dudoso de si había caído en una trampa, Leticia le susurró a su padre que su hogar era íntimo y confortable.

Él le contestó que ya había pensado que prefería estar en su casa.

El doctor Corney dijo que no en absoluto.

Leticia volvió a suspirar por su casa, pero era el suspiro del vencido.

Las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel le tomaron la palabra a Willoughby y dijeron:

—Pero está usted en casa, querida. Este es su hogar. Su padre estará aquí tan bien atendido como en la

casita de campo.

Leticia las miró pesarosa y, por azar, dirigió su mirada al doctor Middleton, del todo por azar.

Era suficientemente elocuente para toda la asamblea lo que Willoughby deseaba que se imaginara.

—Pero Crossjay está allí —exclamó Leticia—. Mi prima se ha ido y el muchacho está solo. No puedo dejarlo solo. Si nosotros, si, doctor Corney, está usted seguro de que no es seguro para papá moverse hoy, Crossjay debe... No puede quedarse solo.

—Tráigalo con usted, Corney —dijo sir Willoughby, y el pequeño doctor prometió cordialmente que lo haría en caso de que encontrara a Crossjay en casa, lo que consideraba muy poco probable.

—Me dio su palabra de que no se iría hasta que yo volviera —dijo Leticia.

—Si Crossjay le dio su palabra —vibraron de cerca los acentos de una nueva voz— puede estar segura de que no volverá con el doctor Corney salvo que lleve consigo la autoridad de su puño y letra.

Clara Middleton se dirigió tranquilamente hacia Leticia y, con los modales de un abrazo, la besó por lo que estaba haciendo por Crossjay. Le ofreció sus labios como si la invitara a presionarlos.

—Ha de venir —dijo Leticia.

—Entonces escríbale para darle permiso.

Hablaron de Crossjay y del centinela fiel a su puesto que podía ser mientras Leticia redactaba angustiada una línea para que el doctor Corney se la entregara. Clara estaba a su lado. Se había reprochado a sí misma la falta de reserva en presencia de lady Busshe y lady Culmer y era culpable de haberse contenido casi de una manera excesiva cuando se dirigió a Leticia. Era, como la mirada de Leticia al doctor Middleton, oportuno: suficiente para hacer de un hombre que vigilaba como Willoughby lo hacía un fatalista de por vida; la sombra de una diferencia en su trato con Leticia bastaba para imputarle que actuara en su presente frialdad o en su calidez anterior. Mejor aún, cuando el doctor Middleton dijo: «Así que nos vamos mañana, querida, y espero que hayas escrito a los Darleton», Clara se ruborizó, radiante, y reprimió una animación repentina con una mirada grave, que podría haberse juzgado llena de pesar, hacia donde se encontraba Willoughby.

El azar trabaja para nosotros cuando somos buenos capitanes.

El orgullo de Willoughby era elevado, aunque se conocía a sí mismo lo suficiente para mantenerlo en el aire como un consumado malabarista lleno de temor y sin recompensa: estaba en manos del mundo.

—¿Has escrito? El cartero pasa en media hora —le dijo a Clara.

—Nos esperan, pero escribiré —respondió. No haber escrito aún contaba a su favor.

Se fue a escribir la carta. El doctor Corney había salido a cumplir su misión y traer a Crossjay y la medicina. Lady Busshe estaba impaciente por irse.

—Corney —le dijo a lady Culmer— es un maldito charlatán.

—Inveterado —fue la respuesta.

—¡Mis pobres caballos!

—¿La joven pareja de bayos?

—Por fortuna, querida. ¡No quiero oír hablar de cenar esta noche!

Sir Willoughby había llevado al señor Dale a una habitación tranquila, contigua al dormitorio del anciano caballero. Dejó a Leticia en el vestíbulo para tener el placer de acompañar a las damas a su carruaje.

—La menor agitación posible. Corney volverá pronto —dijo, admirando con amargura la graciosa servidumbre de la figura de Leticia al peso de su padre en su brazo.

Willoughby había ganado una batalla desesperada, pero ¿qué había ganado? ¿Qué le había dado el mundo a cambio de sus esfuerzos por ganarla? Solo una camisa, podría decir: nada más que lo puesto, sin calidez. Lady Busshe era insoportable; una cotorra, maleducada hasta el punto de haberse permitido decir que el doctor Middleton no era elegible ni suponía una pérdida para el condado. La señora Mountstuart no estaba muy por encima de ella con su inevitable propensión a la caricatura: «¡El púlpito del doctor Middleton pone pies en polvorosa!» Tal vez el reverendo doctor hubiera castigado al mundo al haber abandonado el púlpito y pudiera pensarse que le pisaba los talones, pero Willoughby prefería evitar las imágenes cómicas: odiaba a quienes las ponían en circulación y a quienes se reían con ellas. El desprecio de ese mundo hilarante y vacío, para el que había llevado a cabo una inmolación monstruosa, lo llevó a asociarse mentalmente al doctor Middleton, y también a Clara, por todo lo deseable que había sacrificado: una figura llena de juventud y salud, una compañía brillante, un rostro de innumerables encantos y su propia veracidad, el sentido interior de su dignidad y su temperamento, la límpida franqueza de su aire de desdén, que era para él un semblante de cándida felicidad en la oscura retrospección. Había sacrificado más cosas; miraba científicamente el futuro: habría podido sacrificar una innumerable cantidad de cosas. ¿Para qué?, volvió a preguntarse. ¡Para las miradas y las lenguas favorables de esas mujeres cuyas miradas y lenguas detestaba!

—El doctor Middleton dice que está en deuda conmigo; soy yo el que está profundamente en deuda con *él* —señaló.

—Somos nosotras las que estamos en deuda con *usted* por un romance encantador, mi querido sir Willoughby —dijo lady Busshe, incapaz de corregirse de tanto como él le había imbuido su ficción o la creencia de que tenía una buena historia que poner en circulación.

Lady Busshe se alejó sin dejar de hablar con lady Culmer.

—Un sombrero y un cuerno y sería la vieja figura del cartero en un pliego de cargos —dijo la señora Mountstuart.

Willoughby le agradeció a la gran dama sus servicios y ella elogió al refinado caballero por su noble aplomo. Pero al mismo tiempo se quejó de haberse visto privada de su «encantador» coronel De Craye desde el almuerzo. La ausencia de calidez en el elogio hizo que Willoughby se resintiera y pensara que la maldita camisa que había obtenido del mundo no lo cubría al fin y al cabo: no le llegaba al cuello.

—Acudirá mañana a mí, creo —dijo la señora Mountstuart, reflexionando en su conocimiento superior de los hechos en comparación con lady Busshe, que oiría hablar de algo nuevo y exclamaría: *«¡Esa* es la razón de que haya patrocinado al coronel!». No era nada de eso, pues la señora Mountstuart podía decir honestamente que no era la clase de mujer que hacía de su placer un negocio.

—Horacio es un tipo envidiable —dijo Willoughby, conocedor del Libro, que nos incita siempre, para atenuar, a imaginar que la condición de nuestros amigos es peor que la nuestra y recomienda deglutir la ironía como el mayor bálsamo para las heridas en toda la farmacopea moral.

—No lo sé —respondió ella con un marcado acento de deliberación.

—¡El coronel estará mañana con usted!

—No estoy segura de lo que ganaré con el coronel.

—¿Su cohete perpetuo?

La señora Mountstuart movió la cabeza. Dejó en silencio la cuestión.

—Vendré a recogerlo por la mañana —dijo, y su carruaje se la llevó.

¡Lo había adivinado o Clara le había confiado la traicionera pasión de Horacio De Craye!

Sin embargo, el mundo estaba lejos de Patterne esa noche.

XLVII

Sir Willoughby y su amigo Horacio De Craye

WILLOUGHBY se encerró en su laboratorio para meditar largamente tras el conflicto. Sondeándose, como era habitual en él, para encontrar el plan más grato a su gusto, hizo un extraño descubrimiento entre los círculos inferiores de aquel microcosmos. Ya no lo guiaban para escoger las preferencias y apetitos: tenía que escoger al borde de una discriminación precisa y que su juicio más agudo lo pusiera a prueba antes de que fuera aceptable a su corazón; aunque conocía la dirección de su deseo, era incapaz de dar dos pasos. Había aprendido a leer el mundo; su capacidad parcial para interpretar a las personas había desaparecido. Los misterios de su propio pecho estaban expuestos para él, pero solo los podía comprender en su relación inmediata con el mundo exterior. Ese mundo odioso lo había atrapado y transformado en una máquina. El descubrimiento que había hecho era que, en la gratificación del instinto egoísta, podemos convertirnos en un obstáculo para nosotros mismos y causar una herida devastadora al Yo cualquiera que sea el rumbo que adoptemos.

Seguramente no hay nada más extraño en la experiencia mortal. Estaba confundido. En el juego del ajedrez, nuestro adversario se deshonra cuando nos hace jaque mate, pero, en la vida, al combatir al mundo, esa victoria cuestiona nuestros sentimientos.

La piedad regía la interpretación que Willoughby hacía de su descubrimiento: no le quedaba ninguna otra emoción fuerte. Se compadeció a sí mismo y llegó a la conclusión de que sufría porque era activo: no podía ser aquiescente. Si no hubiera sido por su devoción a su casa y a su nombre, no habría sido dos veces la víctima de la feminidad. ¡Si hubiera sido egoísta habría sido el más feliz de los hombres! Lo dijo en voz alta. Hizo planes de una manera benevolente para su hijo no nacido y las personas que lo rodearan; por ello estaba en una situación que no le dejaba dar un paso sin que sus sentimientos se vieran heridos. Era generoso; de otro modo, ¿no habría mandado a tomar viento a Clara Middleton al principio, enseguida, con desprecio del alma? Era fiel en sus afectos: Leticia estaba bajo su techo para probarlo. Esas dos mujeres eran ejemplo de su poder para perdonar y ahora una palabra tierna a Clara podía cubrirlo de vergüenza. ¡Esa era su gratitud! Y si no se casaba con Leticia, la risa sería diabólica a su alrededor. ¡Esa era la gratitud del mundo! Probablemente la gratitud de Vernon por variar la monotonía de sus días no duraría mucho tiempo. ¿Qué pasaba con Horacio? Willoughby se despojó para entrar en el círculo con Horacio: se quitó el disfraz. Ese hombre había sido el primero en dividir en partes iguales su yo egoísta y su yo amatorio: el asesinato de su individualidad era el crimen de Horacio De Craye. Además, recaía la sospecha en Horacio (no sabía cómo, salvo que el Libro nos hace sospechar de aquellos a los que odiamos) de haber sido el que había traicionado sus recientes tratos con Leticia.

Willoughby recorrió las avenidas de la casa para encontrar a Clara y estar seguro de ella para sí mismo o, si ese era el caso, para Vernon, antes de dar otro paso con Leticia Dale. Clara podía reunirlo, volver a hacer de él un conjunto y un hombre animado, y podía estar dispuesta a ello. Su disposición a escuchar a Vernon lo prometía. «Un caballero dotado de lengua podría tener una oportunidad», había dicho la señora Mountstuart. ¡Cuánto mayor era la oportunidad de un enamorado! Aún no le había suplicado: había mostrado orgullo y temperamento. También él podía cortejar: era un pretendiente torrencial. Y sería glorioso deslizarse alrededor de lady Busshe y el mundo con Clara cogida del brazo y fingir asombro ante las erróneas y profundamente infundadas anticipaciones de cualquier otro desarrollo. Sería un castigo justo para Leticia.

Clara bajó por las escaleras con su carta para la señorita Darleton.

—¿*Debe* ser enviada? —dijo Willoughby, encontrándose con ella en el vestíbulo.

—Nos espera cualquier día, pero será más cómodo para papá —fue su respuesta. Su nueva timidez tenía un aspecto amable.

Clara no parecía pensar que él la hubiera tratado desdeñosamente al lanzársela a su primo, lo que era extraño.

—¿Has visto a Vernon?

—Era tu deseo.

—¿Habéis hablado?

—Hemos conversado.

—¿Mucho tiempo?

—Hemos dado un largo paseo.

—Clara, he tratado de hacer el mejor arreglo posible.

—Tus intenciones eran generosas.

—¿No se ha aprovechado de la ventaja?

—No podía considerarse en serio.

—La intención es que lo fuera.

—En eso veo la generosidad.

Willoughby meditó el elogio y el consentimiento de Clara para hablar del asunto, así como su aire apenas embarazoso y la riqueza de tono al hablar, tan extraña, como extraño era que lo tomara en serio. ¡En apariencia no tenía la sensación femenina de lo imprevisto y absurdo de la cuestión!

—Pero ¡Clara! ¿Debo entender que él no se manifestó?

—Somos excelentes amigos.

—¡Perderla, aunque su oportunidad fuera tan pequeña!

—Olvidas que tal vez no lo fuera para él.

—¿No dijo una palabra de sí mismo?

—No.

—¡Ah! El pobre se ha adiestrado para considerarlo desesperado, frío. ¿Puedo porfiar? ¿Pasas un minuto al laboratorio? Somos dos personas sensatas...

—Perdóname, debo ir con papá.

—Tal vez la historia personal de Vernon...

—La considero honorable para él.

—¿Honorable? ¡Ejem!

—Por comparación.

—¿Comparación con qué?

—Con otros.

Se apartó para sentirse aliviado de una expiración crítica y condenatoria de cierta extensión. La joven sabía demasiado. Pero ¡era físicamente exquisita!

—Clara, ¿podrías prometerme...? Me atendré a ello. Debía haberlo previsto, conozco sus pequeños trucos. ¿Me prometes que le darás otra oportunidad? ¿Te parece repulsiva la idea?

—No hay que pensar en eso.

—¿No te es repulsiva?

—Nada podría ser repulsivo en el señor Whitford.

—No albergo deseos de molestarte, Clara.

—Me siento obligada a escucharte, Willoughby. Haré todo cuanto pueda hacer para complacerte. Es mi deber de por vida.

—¿Podrías, Clara, podrías concebir, podrías simplemente concebirlo: darle tu mano?

—Como amigo, oh sí.

—En matrimonio.

Clara se detuvo. Tan penetrante cuando Willoughby se le oponía, era fácil de engatusar cuando suavizaba sus sentimientos, pues el corazón —aunque más claro, no es el instructor más constante de la cabeza—, el corazón, a diferencia de la cabeza, a menudo más obtusa, trabaja por sí mismo, no para la comunidad.

—Eres tan amable... Haría todo cuanto... —dijo.

—¿Aceptarías casarte con él? Es pobre.

—No ambiciono riquezas.

—¿Te *casarías* con él?

—El matrimonio no entra en mis pensamientos.

—Pero ¿podrías casarte con él?

Willoughby esperaba una negativa. En su expectativa se mostró pomposo.

Clara dijo estas palabras:

—No podría comprometerme a casarme con nadie más.

La sorpresa de Willoughby no se tradujo en una sola sílaba.

Levantó los brazos, pareciéndose a esos pájaros de cuerpo enorme que tratan de alzar el vuelo y dan un saltito.

—¿Te comprometerías? —dijo, contento de ser tratado como un insecto mientras sintiera la agonía de su falso amigo Horacio: sus pretensiones comunes de ganarla eran ahora de un tamaño comparable.

—¡Oh! No hay necesidad. Y un juramento, ¡no! —dijo Clara, estremeciéndose con el recuerdo.

—Pero ¿podrías?

—Mi deseo es complacerte.

—¿Podrías?

—Ya lo he dicho.

Es conocida la historia del montañero patriótico de un canoso montón de años, al que le quedaba poca vida, pero dedicada a su país, que, al borde del precipicio, se había colgado de un invasor joven y vigoroso, entregado exultantemente a la muerte aunque solo fuera para ganar un punto para su país al eliminar en el enemigo de su país al más fuerte. Del mismo modo Willoughby, con el golpe que lo privaba de esperanza, se mostraba exultante con el derrumbamiento de Horacio De Craye. Perecían juntos, pero ¿cuál descendía de una manera más sublimemente gozosa? Y Vernon en manos de Clara sería sencillamente Vernon tolerado. Y Clara en manos de Vernon sería Clara previamente tocada, mancillada. En conjunto disfrutaba de su caída.

Al menos el lecho era confortable si el orgullo había de ataviarse diariamente y no ser tratado nunca de un modo desagradable.

Por tanto era de Leticia. Willoughby recibió con agrado el sonido de la campana que advertía de la vuelta del doctor Corney y dijo de buen humor:

—Espera a ver, Clara, a tu héroe, Crossjay.

Crossjay y el doctor Corney entraron en el vestíbulo. Willoughby tomó a Crossjay de los brazos para elevarlo a la vieja manera que a Clara le gustaba ver. El muchacho pesaba como el plomo.

—Me ha costado pescarlo y mucho más meterlo en la red —dijo el doctor Corney—. He tenido que hacerle creer que ayudaría a todas las almas de la casa, usted entre ellas, señorita Middleton.

Willoughby soltó al muchacho.

Crossjay volvió con Clara con un aspecto más pesado que sus miembros. Clara dejó su carta en el buzón y se lo llevó de la mano para tenerlo en privado junto a ella. Una vez a solas le dijo:

—¡Crossjay, querido, querido! No pareces feliz.

—Sí, ¡quién no lo estaría si no se va a casar con sir Willoughby! —Su voz amenazaba con convertirse en un grito—. Sé que no lo hará, porque el doctor Corney dice que usted se marcha.

—¿Tanto lo deseas, Crossjay?

—Habría podido verla mucho y no la habría visto en absoluto. Estoy seguro de que si lo hubiera sabido no la habría visto, y él me deja al final así.

Crossjay abrió el puño, en el que había tres piezas de oro.

—Ha sido muy amable por su parte —dijo Clara.

—Sí, pero ¿cómo puedo conservarlo?

—Dándoselo al señor Whitford para que te lo guarde.

—Sí, pero, señorita Middleton, ¿no debería decírselo? Me refiero a sir Willoughby.

—¿El qué?

—Pues que yo —Crossjay se acercó a Clara—, pues que yo, que yo... Ya sabe lo que solía decir usted. No quiero mentir, pero no debería si él no me preguntara... ¡Y este dinero! No me importa que me echen otra vez.

—Consulta con el señor Whitford.

—Pero sé lo que usted piensa.

—Tal vez sea mejor que no ahora no digas nada, mi querido muchacho.

—Pero ¿qué hago con este dinero?

Crossjay sostenía las piezas de oro como cosas que no se habían mezclado aún con sus ideas de posesión.

—Escuché y hablé de él —dijo—. No pude evitar escuchar, pero fui y hablé, y no me gusta estar aquí, ni su dinero, ni que no sepa lo que he hecho. ¿No lo ha oído? Estoy seguro de saber lo que usted piensa y por eso lo digo, y debo aprovecharme de mi suerte, siempre estoy metido en líos, entrando o saliendo de ellos. No me importa, realmente no me importa, señorita Middleton, puedo dormir cómodamente en un árbol. Si usted no va a estar aquí, pronto estaré en cualquier parte. Algún día tendré que ganarme la vida. ¿Por qué no grumete? Sir Cloudesley Shovel no lo hizo mejor [61] . Y no me importa que naufragara al final si he de ahogarme como almirante. Así que iré y le pediré que coja su dinero y, si me pregunta, se lo diré. Ya sabe de qué se trata: lo adiviné por lo que dijo el doctor Corney. Estoy seguro de saber que usted está pensando que es viril. ¡Imagine que me quedo su dinero y usted no se casa con él! No me importaría empujar un arado. No sería un mal guardabosques. Desde luego me gustan más los barcos, pero no podemos tenerlo todo.

—Habla primero con el señor Whitford —dijo Clara, demasiado orgullosa del muchacho por crecer como ella lo había adiestrado para aconsejarle un curso de conducta opuesto a sus nociones de virilidad, aunque ahora que había ganado la batalla habría consentido pequeños compromisos casuísticos en aras de la paz general.

Poco después Vernon y el doctor Corney estaban discutiendo el asunto. Corney se oponía a la visión sentimental de la moralidad del caso que Vernon proponía como propia de la señorita Middleton y que él com-

partía parcialmente.

—Si le pesa al muchacho —dijo Vernon—, no puedo prohibirle que vaya a ver a Willoughby y se lo quite de encima, especialmente en lo que me concierne, y antes o después tendré que decírselo yo mismo.

El doctor Corney negó todos los puntos.

—Escúcheme —dijo al final—. Esto queda entre nosotros y no he traicionado la confianza, como no he sido culpable de hacerlo con cuarenta amigos, aunque habría dado mi mano por uno; la izquierda, digamos. Sir Willoughby me ha planteado una o dos preguntas respecto a algo que le interesa, su casa y su nombre. Muy bien y muy buenas a todo eso, aunque habría preferido que la señorita Dale fuera diez años más joven o que hubiera pasado esos diez años sin adversidades ni depresiones que desgarraran los tejidos del marco y la fibra moral. Tendrá una salud excelente, con alguna visita ocasional al médico, tomando su rango y riqueza en serio y devolviendo su pluma a la Madre Ganso. Lo hará. Por supuesto, creo que se debe a mi sagacidad que haya traído al señor Dale y convocado al vecindario, lo que he hecho, exponiendo a nuestro caballero, como una anguila entre dientes, es decir, el hecho positivo y el conocimiento general. Pero advierta, amigo mío. Nos entendemos con un asentimiento. Este muchacho, el joven caballero Crossjay, es un buen ejemplo de muchacho sajón de pura cepa, de la que puedes cortar un tipo tan galante como cualquiera que haya llevado espuelas. Me gusta, a usted le gusta, a la señorita Dale y a la señorita Middleton les gusta, y sir Willoughby Patterne de Patterne Hall y otros lugares no se opondrá a que le guste en caso de que el sol brille sobre él con una determinación particular para que destaque como objeto, por solitario y por Patterne —el doctor Corney respiró hondo y levantó un dedo—. Ahora, advierta esto y *verbum sap:* Crossjay no debe ofender a sir Willoughby. No diré nada más. Mire a lo alto. Los milagros suceden, pero es mejor no contar con ellos. Bueno, y la señorita Dale. ¡Ella no será cruel!

—Parece que lo fuera —dijo Vernon, meditando en el oscuro esbozo que había trazado el doctor.

—No puede, amigo mío. Su posición es precaria; su padre no tiene más que la pensión. Y escribir ha perjudicado su salud. No puede. Y le gusta el baronet. Oh solo se trata de un golpe de sangre orgullosa. Ella es la mujer para él. Lo manejará, le dará la idea de que tiene muchas ideas. Mataría a su padre si fuera obstinada. El señor Dale me ha dicho, cuando le he contado el asunto, algo sobre un sueño cumplido y, si el sueño se disipa, será otro ejemplo de que nos alimentamos más de sueños que de realidades, y también la medicina. La semana pasada no pude lograr que saliera de casa con todo mi arte y ciencia. Oh ella estará de acuerdo. Su padre lo ha profetizado y yo lo profetizo. Ella le tiene mucho cariño.

—Lo tenía.

—¿Ve a través de él?

—Sin hacerle justicia del todo ahora —dijo Vernon—. Willoughby puede ser generoso a su manera.

—¿Cómo? —preguntó Corney, y Vernon le dijo que prestara oídos a su debido momento.

Mientras tanto, el coronel De Craye, tras merodear por el parque y alrededor de la casa de campo en busca de la oportunidad de sorprender a solas a la señorita Middleton, había vuelto con la cabeza gacha por una vez, directamente a las manos de Willoughby.

—Mi querido Horacio —dijo Willoughby—, te he estado buscando toda la tarde. El hecho es que me imagino que pensarás que has sido traído aquí con falsos pretextos, pero la verdad es que no soy tan culpable como supone el mundo. De hecho, para ser breve, la señorita Dale y yo... No consulto a otros hombres cómo habrían actuado. El hecho en cuestión es, la señorita Middleton... Me imagino que ya lo habrás adivinado en parte.

—En parte —dijo De Craye.

—Bien, ella prefiere ese camino y, aunque se vuelva demasiado duro, es el mejor arreglo en el que puedo pensar.

La viveza de los rasgos del coronel empalideció.

—Podemos apoyar a un buen amigo que se convierte en un buen marido —dijo Willoughby—. No podía romper con ella en esta situación sin darme cuenta de eso. Y puedo hablar muy bien de ella, aunque ella y yo hayamos visto a tiempo que no encajamos. Mi mujer ha de ser inteligente.

—Siempre lo he pensado —dijo el coronel De Craye, resplandeciente y con el aspecto hambriento de un lobo reflejado en su asombro.

—Como puedes suponer, no habrá reproches. Ya conoces mi disgusto por el chismorreo y las murmuraciones. Sin embargo, que recaigan sobre mí; mis espaldas son anchas. He hecho cuanto he podido para persuadirla y parece que hay una probabilidad de que consienta. Me ha dicho que su deseo es complacerme y esto me complace.

—Desde luego. ¿Quién es el caballero?

—Mi mejor amigo, como te digo. No habría podido proponer a otro. Dejemos que el asunto vaya con la misma suavidad que hasta ahora.

Dentro del coronel hubo una sublevación para acallar su ingenio y Willoughby pareció tan amable que

era posible suponer que el hombre de los proyectos le hubiera mencionado a su mejor amigo a la señorita Middleton.

—¿Quién era el mejor amigo?

No habiendo sido acusado de traición, el coronel de ojos vivaces se engañó.

—¿Darás a conocer su nombre, Willoughby?

—No sería educado con él ahora, Horacio —pregúntatelo a ti mismo—, ni con ella. Estas cosas son delicadas. No tengas prisa.

—Desde luego. No preguntaré: solo las iniciales.

—Tienes una aptitud admirable para adivinar, Horacio, y este caso no te ofrece un problema difícil, aunque reconozcas la dificultad. La respeto a ella y lo respeto a él, a ambos por igual; sabes que lo hago y estaré muy agradecido si zanjo la cuestión.

—¡Señorial! —dijo De Craye.

—No lo veo así. Lo llamo sensato.

—¡Oh! Sin duda. Me refería al estilo. ¿Pasablemente antiguo?

—Diría que novedoso y que no es peor por eso. Queremos un trato sencillo y práctico entre hombres y mujeres. Solemos equivocarnos al respecto. Y aborrezco la porquería sentimental.

De Craye suspiró.

—Pero ¿la dama? —dijo.

—Ya te he dicho que hay una probabilidad de que consienta.

El pez de Willoughby dio un saltito perceptible ahora que había aprendido a ejercer su aptitud adivinatoria.

—¿Sin los preliminares de costumbre por parte del caballero? —dijo.

—Hemos de acompasarlo, amigo Horacio. Es un inepto notorio con las mujeres; no tiene una palabra para ellas y no ha conquistado ninguna.

De Craye erizó sus plumas bajo la grata charla. Su rostro se volvió humorísticamente escéptico.

—¿La dama no se opone a darle al pobre hombre audiencia?

—Tengo motivos para pensar que no —dijo Willoughby, alegre de representar una indiferencia hacia ella que podía mostrar las inclinaciones de la dama.

—¿Motivos?

—Buenos motivos.

—Benditos sean.

—Tan buenos como puedan serlo con una mujer.

—¿Ah?

—Te lo aseguro.

—¡Ah! ¿No se lo parecen a ella?

—Bueno, no la comprometerían a aceptarlo.

—Bueno, eso se parece más a ella.

—Pero dice que no se comprometería a casarse con nadie más.

El coronel dio un respingo y gritó:

—¿Clara Middleton ha dicho eso? —se refrenó—. Es una maravillosa conformidad.

—Desea complacerme. Nos separamos en esos términos. Y yo deseo su felicidad. Mi corazón se ha desarrollado tarde y se da en pensar en otros.

—Nada mejor. Pareces estar muy seguro de la otra parte, de nuestro amigo.

—Lo conoces muy bien, Horacio, para dudar de su disposición.

—¿Y *tú,* Willoughby?

—Ella tiene dinero y buen aspecto. Sí, puedo decir que lo conozco.

—¡No diría nada bueno de un hombre que hubiera que empujarlo a ese altar iluminado!

—Si requiere persuasión, tú y yo, Horacio, podemos hacerlo volver en sí.

—¡Habría que darle de golpes!

—Me gusta ver a todos felices a mi alrededor —dijo Willoughby, mencionando la hora como el momento de vestirse para cenar.

El sentimiento que había manifestado fue la excusa de De Craye para darle la mano y felicitarlo, pero el coronel se traicionó al hacerlo con un fervor extremo, casi tembloroso.

—¿Cuándo sabremos más? —dijo.

—Oh mañana, probablemente —dijo Willoughby—. No tengas prisa.

—¡Soy un niño dormido! —respondió el coronel y se marchó.

Lo parecía, en opinión de Willoughby, o un traidor drogado. «¡Y yo que creía que tenía dos dedos de frente!»

¿Quién no se volverá un bobo si lo fustigamos con su vanidad? El consuelo de los grandes es verlos devanarse. Pero el placer es elevado y emborrachar a un falso amigo puede ser un consuelo momentáneo por nuestra inmerecida desgracia.

Entre sus muchas preocupaciones, Willoughby tuvo la satisfacción de ver el efecto de la ebriedad en Horacio De Craye en presencia de Clara. Podría haberse reído. Las notas marginales que añadió al capítulo del Libro que trata de los amigos y una mujer estaban cortadas en agudos epigramas y, de no haber estado profundamente preocupado, turbado por una información reciente que le habían comunicado las señoritas, sus tías, habría interpretado los dos papeles para la diversión real que le ofrecía su amigo Horacio.

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61 Almirante inglés.

XLVIII

Los enamorados

ERAN cerca de las once de la noche. Leticia se encontraba en la habitación contigua al dormitorio de su padre. Apoyaba el codo en la mesa junto a su silla y tamborileaba con dos dedos sus sienes. El estado entre pensar y sentir, cuando mezclamos ambos y los dejamos fluir, es uno de los interludios de nuestra naturaleza, después de que el pensamiento haya aquietado los nervios y no pueda hacer nada más. Parecía meditar. Solo era consciente de una lucha pasada.

Respondió a una llamada a la puerta y levantó los ojos hacia Clara.

Clara entró suavemente.

—¿Duerme el señor Dale?

—Eso espero.

—¡Ah querida amiga!

Leticia se dejó coger la mano.

—¿Ha tenido usted una tarde agradable?

—El señor Whitford y papá se han ido a la biblioteca.

—¿Ha estado cantando el coronel De Craye?

—Sí y ¡con qué voz! Pensaba que ustedes estaban arriba, pero no pude pedirle que cantara abajo.

—Probablemente esté exultante.

—Podríamos suponerlo: ha cantado bien.

—¿No es usted consciente de la razón?

—No puede tener que ver conmigo.

Clara se había ruborizado, pero pudo soportar una mirada firme.

—¿Se ha ido Crossjay a la cama?

—Hace tiempo. Llegó a los postres. No probó nada.

—Es un muchacho extraño.

—No tan extraño, Leticia.

—No ha venido a darme las buenas noches.

—Eso no es extraño.

—Era su costumbre en la casa de campo y aquí, y sabe que me gusta.

—¡Oh! Lo sabe. Yo puedo haber despertado su entusiasmo, pero a usted la ama.

—¿Por qué dice que no es extraño, Clara?

—La teme a usted un poco.

—¿Por qué habría de temerme Crossjay?

—Querida, se lo diré. Anoche... Perdónelo, porque fue accidental: la puerta de su dormitorio estaba cerrada y corrió al salón y se escondió en la otomana, donde se durmió debajo de la colcha de las señoritas, ¡con botas y todo, me temo!

Leticia aprovechó la absurda ilusión y le agradeció a Clara de corazón el refugio.

—Tendría que haberse quitado las botas —dijo.

—Se quedó dormido y se despertó. Querida, su intención no era mala. Al día siguiente repitió lo que había oído. Lo culpará usted. Su pobre cabeza juvenil era sincera. Y ahora corre por el condado. ¡Ah! No frunza el ceño.

—¡Eso explica a lady Busshe! —exclamó Leticia.

—Querida, querida amiga —dijo Clara—. Asumo su ternura conmigo, pero permítame: mañana me iré. ¿Por qué rechaza usted su felicidad? Esas amables señoritas están profundamente turbadas. Dicen que su resolución es inflexible; se resiste usted a sus ruegos y a los de su padre. ¿Tal vez sea porque albergue usted alguna duda de la fuerza de esta adhesión? No la tengo. No he tenido dudas de que era el más fuerte de los sentimientos de Willoughby. Si antes de irme pudiera verla a usted, a ambos, felices, me sentiría aliviada, regocijada.

Leticia dijo tranquilamente:

—¿Recuerda usted un paseo que dimos un día juntas hacia la casa de campo?

Clara juntó sus manos con el movimiento de tratar de taparse los oídos.

—¡Antes de irme! —dijo—. Si hubiera sabido que esto iba a pasar, con todo deseo, antes de irme, no

me sentiría como me siento. Me gustaría verla a usted feliz... Y a él, sí, también a él. ¿Es como pedirle a usted que pague mi deuda? Entonces ¡por favor! Pero no, no soy más que parcialmente egoísta en esta ocasión. Willoughby se ha ganado mi gratitud. Puede ser realmente generoso.

—¿Un Egoísta?

—¿Quién lo es?

—¿Ha olvidado usted nuestra conversación aquel día de nuestro paseo a la casa de campo?

—Ayúdeme a olvidarlo: ¡ese día y aquellos días y todos aquellos días! Me alegraría pensar que he pasado un tiempo bajo tierra y he surgido de nuevo. Yo era la Egoísta. Estoy segura: si hubiera sido enterrada, no me habría levantado al verme tan vilmente manchada, sucia, desfigurada. ¡Oh! Ayúdeme a olvidar mi conducta, Leticia. Él y yo no encajábamos y recuerdo que me culpaba a mí misma entonces. Usted y él encajan y ahora me doy cuenta del orgullo que puede advertirse en él. Lo peor que puede decirse es que se propone demasiado.

—¿Hay alguna proposición reciente? —dijo Leticia.

El rubor cubrió el rostro de Clara.

—¿No lo ha oído? Era imposible, pero la intención ha sido amable. Juzgando por mis sentimientos en este momento, puede entender los suyos. Nos gusta ver a nuestros amigos establecidos.

Leticia asintió.

—Ha picado mi curiosidad, desde luego.

—Querida amiga, mañana nos habremos ido. Confío en que piense en mí mejor en lo esencial de lo que parezco y mi razón para confiar en ello es que sé que siempre he sido honesta, una joven tosca y estúpidamente impaciente, pero no insincera. No es una ambición elevada desear que me recuerden con ese carácter, pero eso es lo que su Clara ha descubierto. Se lo diré. Su deseo es... Su deseo es que yo prometa entregar mi mano al señor Whitford. Ya ve usted su amabilidad.

Los ojos de Leticia se abrieron y quedaron fijos.

—¿Cree que es amabilidad?

—La intención. Me envió al señor Whitford y he aprendido a esperarlo.

—¿Ha sido eso amable con el señor Whitford?

—¡Qué impresión debí causarle durante aquel paseo hasta la casa de campo, Leticia! No me extraña. Yo estaba febril.

—¿Consintió usted en escuchar?

—Lo hice. Me sorprende ahora, pero pensé que no podía rehusar.

—Mi pobre amigo Vernon Whitford probó a hacer una declaración de amor.

—¿Él? ¡Oh no!

—¿Lo desalentó usted?

—¿Yo? No.

—Cortésmente, quiero decir.

—No.

—¿No lo consideraría usted una nimiedad? Vernon tiene un gran corazón.

—¿Lo tiene?

—¿Lo pregunta? Usted sabe algo de él.

—No me lo expuso, querida, ni siquiera la superficie de esa poderosa profundidad.

Leticia arrugó la frente.

—No —dijo Clara—, una coqueta no; no es una coqueta, se lo aseguro.

Riéndose, Leticia replicó:

—Aún tiene usted el *terrible poder* que me hizo sentir aquel día.

—Desearía usarlo con un buen propósito.

—¿No habló él?

—De Suiza, el Tirol, la *Iliada,* Antígona.

—¿Eso fue todo?

—No, de economía política. Nuestra situación, concederá usted, carecía de ejemplos: o la mía. ¿Le interesa la mía?

—Debería, si conociera sus sentimientos.

—Estaba agradecida a sir Willoughby; apenada por el señor Whitford.

—¿Una pena real?

—Porque la tarea que se le había impuesto de mostrarme cortésmente que no entraba en las ideas de su primo era evidentemente muy grande, extremadamente pesada.

—¡Clara, tiene una percepción inmediata de algunas cosas!

—Él lo sentía por mí. Lo vi en su evitación de... Fue, como siempre, agradable. Paseamos por el parque

durante no sé cuánto tiempo, aunque no pareció mucho.

—¿Sin aludir al asunto?

—Ni siquiera acercarnos, querida. Un caballero debe estimar a la muchacha a la que plantea... algunas preguntas. Me imagino que le gusto como una amiga volátil.

—¿Si se hubiera ofrecido?

—¿Despreciándome?

—Puede ser usted infantil, Clara. Probablemente se complace en burlarse. Él tuvo su momento y ahora me toca a mí.

—Pero él ha de despreciarme un poco.

—¿Está usted ciega?

—Tal vez, querida, las dos lo estemos, un poco.

Las dos damas se miraron profundamente la una a la otra.

—¿Me responderá? —dijo Leticia.

—¿A su sí? Si lo hiciera sería un acto de condescendencia.

—Es usted demasiado escurridiza.

—Pare, querida Leticia. Fue considerado en no sentir pena por mí.

—Eso es una respuesta. Le ha dejado percibir que le habría apenado.

—Querida, si puedo convencerla de lo que yo era, en un símil creo que yo era como el corcho de un pescador en el agua, completamente tranquilo y dispuesto a hundirse inmediatamente o a emerger. Hasta ahí mi conducta.

—Los símiles tienen el mérito de satisfacer a quien los encuentra y de rebajar al oyente —dijo Leticia—. Ha admitido que habría podido herir sus sentimientos.

—Era el corcho de un pescador. Por favor, admire mi símil, como quiera, de un modo u otro, o de una manera tan tranquila que tiene a los ojos al sueño. De repente habría podido desaparecer en las profundidades o flotar en el aire. Pero no picó ningún pez.

—Entonces, para seguirla, suponiendo el pez o al pescador, pues no sé quién es quién... ¡Oh no! No: es demasiado serio para imaginarlo. Entiendo que le agradeció al menos su reserva.

—Sí.

—¿Sin el menor aliento para que la rompiera?

—¡El corcho de un pescador, Leticia!

Perpleja y suspirando, Leticia mantuvo silencio un rato.

El símil irritaba su ingenio con la sospecha de un significado oculto.

—¿Si hubiera hablado? —dijo.

—Es un hombre muy sincero.

—Y las recriminaciones de los hombres a las mujeres melindrosas que revolotean sin llegar a ninguna parte son incomprensibles para mí.

—Entonces, Leticia, si hubiera hablado, si, y podríamos imaginarlo sincero...

—¿Un hombre muy sincero?

—Estoy pensando en mí. ¡Sí! Me habría muerto de vergüenza. ¿Dónde he leído una historia de una centella inextinguible? Se habría encendido en mi corazón.

—¿Vergüenza, Clara? Usted es libre.

—Lo que queda de mí.

—Puedo imaginar cierta vergüenza en una posición donde no había sentimiento, sino orgullo.

Leticia dijo pensativa:

—¡Y se demora usted en la amabilidad de una proposición tan extraordinaria!

Habiendo ganado algo de luz, exclamó con impaciencia:

—Vernon la ama.

—¡No diga eso!

—Lo he visto.

—No he tenido una señal de eso.

—Esa es la prueba.

—¡Cuando habría podido mostrarla una y otra vez!

—¡La prueba mayor!

—¿Por qué no ha dicho nada cuando tenía el privilegio? De una manera extraña, pero privilegio.

—Tenía miedo.

—¿De mí?

—Miedo a herirla y también a herirse a sí mismo posiblemente. A los hombres se les puede perdonar que piensen en sí mismos en esos casos.

—Pero ¿qué habría de temer?

—Que otro fuera más querido para usted.

—¿Qué motivo habría dado...? ¡Ah! Ya lo veo. Podía temerlo, ¡sospecharlo! ¡Ya veo la opinión que tiene de mí! ¿Podría preocuparle semejante chiquilla? Insúlteme, Leticia. Merezco toda una serie de improperios. Necesito la purificación por el fuego. ¿Qué he sido en esta casa? Tengo la sensación de haber sido un torbellino, como una loca. ¡Y ser amada a pesar de todo! ¡No! Deberíamos oír el cuento de un anticuario que aprecia una maltrecha reliquia del campo de batalla en la que nadie más se fija. Ser amada, lo veo, es sentir nuestra pequeñez, nuestro vacío; es sentir vergüenza. Todas nuestras manchas relucen. ¡No haberme dado una señal cuando un enamorado habría estado tan tentado de hacerlo! Permítame ser incrédula, mi querida Leticia. ¡Porque es un hombre de honor, diría usted! Pero ¿no es usted consciente de la tortura que inflige? Pues si —como usted dice— ese caballero me ama, ¡qué objeto es el que ama, que ha estado clamando con menos modestia de la que es tolerable oír a las mujeres y de la que ella misma piensa! ¡Oh! He visto mi corazón. Es un espectro espantoso. He descubierto en mí una debilidad que me llevaría a cualquier parte. Verdaderamente seré merecedora de la caridad de las mujeres: me lo he ganado. Pero ¡amada! ¡Por Vernon Whitford! ¿La pequeña miserable recogida y amada después de haberse roto en pedazos? ¿No habrá estado especulando usted? ¡No lo sabe con seguridad! ¿Por qué me besa?

—¿Por qué tiembla y se ruboriza de ese modo?

Clara la miró con toda la nitidez que pudo. Inclinó la cabeza.

—¡Empeora mi conducta!

Recibió un beso a cambio. Era su declaración y lo entendió: saber que lo había amado o había estado dispuesta a amarlo la ensombreció retrospectivamente.

—¡Ah! Usted me ha leído de arriba abajo —dijo Clara, volviéndose hacia ella para abrazarla.

—Entonces ¿no había motivos para su temor? —susurró Leticia.

Clara apartó su cabeza de la vista.

—No es que mi corazón... Pero he dicho que lo vi y es indigno de él. Si, como ahora pienso, yo hubiera podido ser tan ruda, tan débil, perversa, imperdonable —¡tenía esos pensamientos!—, oírlo hablar habría hecho necesario que me descubriera y le dijera (¡increíble para usted, sí) que mientras... Sí, Leticia, todo eso es verdad y, pensando en él como el más noble de los hombres, habría agradecido cualquier ayuda que cortara mi nudo. Así que ya puede ver —dijo Clara, saliendo del nido parpadeando— la pena que he mencionado.

—¿Por qué no me lo explicó enseguida?

—Querida, quería que pasara un siglo.

—¿Y cree que ha pasado?

—Sí: en el Purgatorio, con un ángel a mi lado. Mi informe del lugar será favorable. Buen ángel, aún tengo algo que decir.

—Dígalo y extiéndase.

—Creo que una vez o dos habré imaginado, oscuramente, especialmente hoy... Seguramente no habré tenido una sola idea, pero que él viniera a verme y que no hiciera lo que cualquier otro habría hecho, me pareció... Un caballero de verdadera nobleza no arroja una luz corriente para que lo leamos. Necesitaba su voz, pero el silencio, creo, me ha dicho más: si una naturaleza como la mía pudiera tener fe sin oír el sonsonete de la lengua...

Un golpe en la puerta hizo que las damas intercambiaran miradas.

Leticia se levantó al entrar Vernon.

—Iba a salir a ver a mi padre unos minutos —dijo.

—Y yo vengo de ver al suyo —le dijo Vernon a Clara.

Ella observó una expresión muy amenazadora en él.

El trasgo de la contrariedad se le subió al cerebro para indemnizarla por su reciente abatimiento. Al ver que se cerraba la puerta del dormitorio tras Leticia dijo:

—Por supuesto papá se habrá ido a la cama —implicando: «De otro modo...».

—Sí, se ha ido a la cama. Me ha deseado lo mejor.

—Su fórmula de buenas noches comprende ese deseo.

—En su defecto, ¡sería buenas noches para bien en mi caso!

A Clara se le cortó ligeramente la respiración.

—Nos vamos mañana temprano.

—Lo sé. Tengo una cita en Bregenz en junio.

—¿Tan pronto? ¿Con papá?

—De allí tiremos al Tirol y torceremos a la derecha, hacia el sur.

—¡A los Alpes italianos! ¿Y se da por supuesto que yo formaré parte de esa expedición?

—Su padre ha mostrado dudas.

—¿Han hablado de mí, entonces?

—Me he atrevido a hablar de usted. No soy demasiado osado, como sabe.

Los encantadores ojos de Clara impidieron que los párpados ocultaran su suavidad.

—Papa no habrá pensado que mi presencia a su lado sea dudosa.

—Dejará que lo decida usted.

—Sí, entonces, muchas veces, todas las que puedan decirse.

—¿Se da cuenta de lo que está diciendo?

—Señor Whitford, cierro mis ojos y digo sí.

—Cuidado. Se lo advierto. Si cierra los ojos...

—Por supuesto —ella se apartó de él— las grandes montañas se contentarán con mi admiración a sus pies.

—Eso valdrá para empezar.

—Son alentadoras.

—Una de ellas —el pecho de Vernon se hinchó.

—¿Estar a sus pies hace de usted una montaña? —dijo ella.

—¡Con el corazón de un ratón si eso me satisface!

—Se eleva usted demasiado: es usted inaccesible.

—Le haré una segunda advertencia. Puede usted ser atrapada y elevada.

—Alguien tendrá que inclinarse entonces.

—¡Plantarla a usted como la bandera en la cima conquistada!

—Es verdad que ha hablado usted con papá, señor Whitford.

Vernon cambió de tono.

—¿Le cuento lo que ha dicho?

—Conozco muy bien su lenguaje.

—Ha dicho...

—Pero usted ha reaccionado a ello.

—Solo en parte. Ha dicho...

—No va a enseñarme nada.

—Ha dicho...

—¡Vernon, no! ¡No en esta casa!

La súplica emparejada a su nombre confesó el fin al que la rápida visión de Clara percibió que se dirigía y donde sucumbiría.

Clara revivió el mismo encogimiento en él al musitar su gran palabra: aquí no; en alguna parte a la sombra de las montañas.

Pero él estaba seguro de ella. Y sus manos se unieron. Las dos manos lo pensaron así, o no lo pensaron, comportándose como inocentes.

El espíritu del doctor Middleton, como Clara sentía, había soplado sobre Vernon, recompensándolo por su franqueza. Sobre sus libros, Vernon había cerrado abruptamente un volumen y contado el cuento de la casa. «¿Tiene este hombre una pizca de religión en él?», se había preguntado el reverendo doctor a mitad de camino. Vernon había establecido una causa general por su primo al respecto. «¡El punto complementario a su *i* de una criatura humana civilizada corrientemente!», dijo el doctor Middleton, mirando su reloj y descubriendo que era muy tarde para dejar la casa antes de la mañana. La arriesgada comunicación estaba al caer. Vernon estaba exponiendo la narración del generoso plan de Willoughby cuando el doctor Middleton lo electrizó al exclamar: «¡Aquel de todos los hombres vivos con quien deseo que mi hija se despose!», y Willoughby ascendió en la estima del reverendo doctor: alabó a aquel sensato caballero que daba su visto bueno al cambio de humor de una doncella, aunque la fortuna le había quitado el gusto por el cambio en la escuela. El padre de la apreciación de la doncella de su volatilidad exhibió en su exhortación a Vernon que estaba al margen de ella así como que había perdido su autoridad para poner fin a sus caprichos y asegurarle la paz esa mañana. Vernon vaciló. El doctor Middleton insistió en que no estaba seguro de que no fuera él quien había cometido el error. Vernon, para probar su honestidad, puso al desnudo su historia. «Vaya con ella», dijo el doctor Middleton. Vernon propuso un encuentro en Suiza, al que el doctor Middleton asintió, añadiendo: «Vaya con ella», y como parecía un completo extraño al decoro de la situación, Vernon puso su delicadeza a un lado y, con el corazón en la mano, obedeció. También él había ponderado el consentimiento de Clara a encontrarse con él tras conocer los términos de Willoughby y sus modales serios y dulces durante el paseo por el parque. El aliento de su padre había soplado sobre él, así que ahora, con nada salvo la fe que yace en la sensación para convencerlo de su feliz fortuna (y lo poco convincente que resulta hasta que la mente la capta y la sella lo experimentamos incluso cuando reconocemos que somos los más dicho-

sos), él le tendió la mano. Y aunque fuera duro para él, para ambos, pero más duro para el hombre, reprimir su palabra en particular de un vuelo al cielo cuando la jaula se abrió y la naturaleza les hizo señas, tenía práctica en dominarse a sí mismo y ella lo amó más por eso.

Leticia fue testigo de su unión de manos al volver a la habitación.

Prometieron visitarla por la mañana temprano, sin sospechar que la dejaban en una noche de tormenta y lágrimas.

Leticia se sentó a meditar sobre la apreciación que Clara tenía de la generosidad de sir Willoughby.

XLIX

Leticia y sir Willoughby

No podemos ser cómplices de las tribus de duendes cuya diversión se ceba en las fragilidades de nuestra pobre constitución humana. Tienen su lugar y su utilidad y, mientras sigamos donde estamos, colgarán de nosotros, arrancándonos incansablemente los adornos que cubren nuestra desnudez, sin dejar de tirar de ellos y desgarrarlos hasta que nos hayan despojado en una de sus horribles noches de Walpurgis, cuando la risa que se oye es de una índole que vuelve la risa espantosa a oídos de los hombres el resto de sus días. Pero si, en esas horas de festival bajo los rayos de Hécate, la musa cómica no puede controlarlos, no los adulará con su presencia mientras dure su insana e impía hilaridad, cuya descripción haría de Brocken, Graymalkin y Paddock nuestros familiares íntimos [62] .

Bastará con decir que hora tras hora, pasada la medianoche, hasta el gris amanecer, ayudado a intervalos por las señoritas Eleanor e Isabel y por el señor Dale, despierto y reavivado —al oír la vehemencia de su grito de petición para suavizar la dureza de Leticia—, sir Willoughby le pidió que se casara con él hasta que la insistencia de su cortejo desgastó el aspecto del amor perdurable por el que deliraba hasta convertirlo en un estado de locura. Willoughby aparecía, se iba, volvía y todo el tiempo sus duendes danzaban a su alrededor y por encima de él, montándolo, urgiéndolo, empujándolo, inspirándole un patetismo a ultranza, una elocuencia que conmovía a cualquiera salvo a los muertos, cuyo objeto parecía ser la roma atención de Leticia. Willoughby los oía, hablaba con ellos, los acariciaba; huía de ellos y se escapaba hasta que, vencido, volvían a montarlo y formar un enjambre a su alrededor. Hay hombres a los que acosan así los duendes. Los hombres que, al fijarse en un objeto, deben tenerlo, alimentan a los duendes. Se hacen notar por sus singularidades, como se llama a su conversación con las distracciones invisibles y sorprendentes. Willoughby se decía a sí mismo al precipitarse en la soledad: «¡Creo que estoy poseído!». Y si no lo creía, sino que solo lo sospechaba, o articulaba un discurso para explicar la transformación que había experimentado en una criatura desesperadamente suplicante, habiendo perdido el trato con su personalidad habitual, las operaciones de una hueste impía golpeaban sin duda su conciencia.

Los tenía en el cerebro, pues, mientras ardía por Leticia de un modo que lo incitaba a frenéticos excesos de lenguaje y comportamiento, era consciente de los gritos de nombres como los de lady Busshe y la señora Mountstuart Jenkinson, que, dejándolo helado como lo dejaban, eran la causa directa de que se apresurara a una extravagancia más salvaje y a una determinación más obstinada para someter antes de que rompiera el día a la mujer a la que casi temía contemplar a la luz del día, aunque se había persuadido apasionadamente a sí mismo de que la amaba. Sentía que no podía alcanzar la luz del día sin ella. Ella era su mañana. Era, deliraba, la mujer predestinada para él. Gritaba: «¡Cariño!», a ella y a su soledad. El enamorado caballero abandonó todas las prescripciones de su ideal de conducta como ejemplo para su clase y su país. Había perdido el mando de su semblante. Se inclinó hasta el punto de arrodillarse, no sin elegancia. En las crónicas de la hueste invisible que lo rodeaba se cuenta que, en un acceso de súplica, al gritar dos veces «¡Leticia!», lloriqueó.

Con esto basta. No sin razón la multitud de servidores de la musa en esta tierra de sociabilidad evita escenas de promiscuidad desordenada, que menoscaban la dignidad de nuestros dirigentes y amenazan a la naturaleza humana con la confusión. Sagaces aquellos que guían al individuo en líneas generales, por sendas familiares y rasgos conocidos. Lo que hagan los hombres, y hagan los hombres orientados por el amor, es menos importante que lo que resulta conveniente que muestren que hacen.

La noche terminaba. Leticia se doblegaba, pero no se había rendido. Se había visto obligada a decir —no podía recordar cuántas veces—: «No le amo, no tengo amor que dar», y, al salir de una noche semejante para mirar de nuevo el rostro del día, apenas se sentía viva.

Su padre renovó la lucha con el canto de los pájaros. El señor Dale le causó entonces la primera impresión seria que Leticia recibió. Habló de sus circunstancias, de que se separarían y ella quedaría en la pobreza, con una salud débil; del daño que le causaría escribir para comer y del opresivo peso que él se quitaría de encima si ella consentía. Ya no le imploraba; planteó el caso en un terreno común.

Y dijo con inmensa inquietud:

—Te ruego que no seas despiadada, hija mía.

El enunciado práctico y la adjuración incongruente con que terminaba armonizaban con el desordenado entendimiento de Leticia, con la pérdida de todos sus sentimientos y su deseo de ser amable. Suspiró para sí

misma: «¡Por fin se ha acabado!».

Su padre estaba muy débil para levantarse. Se quedó dormido. Leticia estaba obligada a quedarse en la casa durante horas y recorrió su habitación, de la puerta a las ventanas, pensando en la observación de Clara del siglo que tenía que pasar. No lo deseaba, pero tuvo una iluminación que le mostró que podía suponer que un siglo no la habría afectado. Vio que era imposible que fuera repentino, que no era deseable, aunque fuera posible, aunque tuviera los rasgos de lo posible. Por fortuna había resistido con demasiada firmeza para que volvieran a suplicarle.

Los rasgos de lo posible, una vez vistos, atraen la reconsideración. La riqueza nos da el poder de hacer el bien en la tierra. La riqueza nos capacita para ver el mundo, las escenas hermosas de la tierra. Leticia anhelaba desde hacía mucho tiempo una bolsa de dinero como dote en su cintura y las alas para volar al extranjero, hacia tierras que en su famélica imaginación habían empezado a parecer fabulosas. Si sus sentimientos por el caballero habían desaparecido, solo se trataba de una ilusión perdida; una visión precisa y el conocimiento no harían de una mujer la compañera menos valiosa. Era la compañera que él necesitaba y podía guiarlo. Una adhesión sentimental le habría resultado inútil, pero no la mujer aliada mediante un vínculo puramente racional, y a él le hacía falta una guía. Por fortuna, ella le había contado demasiadas cosas de su débil salud y su falta de amor para reducirse a ser sometida a otro ataque.

Se ocupó de su habitación e hizo los preparativos para su partida, de manera que no hubiera tiempo que perder cuando su padre se hubiera desayunado y vestido.

Clara fue su primera visita y cada una de ellas le preguntó a la otra si había dormido y tomó el rostro que se presentaban como respuesta. Las ojeras de Leticia eran muy oscuras. Clara fue su espejo y le dijo:

—¡Un objeto singular de persecución a lo largo de una noche para conseguir su mano! Conozco esas dos hojas húmedas que llevo sobre mis mejillas para recordar las noches en vela. Pero usted ha dormido bien, Clara.

—He dormido bien y, sin embargo, podría decir que no he dormido en absoluto, Leticia. Estaba con usted, querida, parte en sueños y parte en pensamiento, esperando encontrarla sensata antes de irme.

—Sensata. Esa es la palabra que me conviene.

Leticia esbozó la historia de la noche y Clara dijo, con una sinceridad manifiesta que testificaba su gratitud con sir Willoughby:

—¿Pudo usted resistirlo, tan serio como es?

Leticia veía la naturaleza humana sin amargura y respondió:

—Espero, Clara, que no empiece con una gran reserva de sentimiento, pues no hay nada como eso para hacernos duras, prosaicas, mundanas, calculadoras.

La siguiente visita fue Vernon, extraordinariamente ansioso por tener noticias del señor Dale. Leticia fue a la habitación de su padre para traérselas. Al volver los encontró con rostros tristes y se atrevió, alarmada por ellos, a preguntar la causa.

—Es esta —dijo Vernon—. Willoughby no dejará de fastidiar al muchacho para que lo quiera. Tal vez, pobre muchacho, tuviera una excusa anoche. De cualquier forma ha ido a la habitación de Crossjay esta mañana, lo ha despertado y ha hablado con él hasta hacerlo llorar y, con una cosa y otra, a Crossjay se le ha hecho un nudo en la garganta, como él dice, y ha soltado todo lo que sabía y lo que había hecho. No necesito decirle las consecuencias. Se ha arruinado aquí para bien, así que debo llevármelo.

Vernon miró a Clara.

—Debe hacerlo —dijo ella—. Es tan mío como suyo. ¿No hay oportunidad de perdón?

—No es probable.

—¡Leticia!

—¿Qué puedo hacer?

—¡Oh! ¿Qué no puede hacer?

—*No* lo sé.

—¡Enséñele a perdonar!

El ceño de Leticia contuvo a Clara de atormentarla.

No bajaría al desayuno familiar. Clara se habría quedado a tomar el té con ella en su habitación, pero a la reprendida joven se le pidió un último acto de conformidad. Prometió marcharse al acabar el desayuno. No de un modo innatural, por tanto, Leticia supuso que sería ella a quien dejara pasar, media hora después, con un alegre grito de «Entre, querida».

La llamada a la puerta había sonado como la de Clara.

Sir Willoughby entró.

Dio un paso adelante y juntó las manos.

—¡Querido! —dijo—. No puede retirar lo que ha dicho. Me ha llamado querido [63] . Soy, debo ser querido por usted. La palabra ha salido, por accidente o no, pero, por el cielo, la tengo y no se la doy a nadie. Me

ame o no, cásese conmigo y mi amor se la devolverá. Usted me ha enseñado que no soy tan fuerte. Debo tenerla a mi lado. Tiene usted poderes a los que yo no daba crédito.

—Se equivoca conmigo, sir Willoughby —dijo Leticia débilmente, agotada como estaba.

—Una mujer que puede resistirse a mi petición de que sea mi esposa, a lo largo de toda una noche de súplicas, tiene la cualidad que necesito para mi casa y golpearé sus oídos durante meses, con tan poco reposo como el que he tenido esta noche, antes de renunciar a mi oportunidad. Pero anoche le dije que la quería en doce horas. He apostado mi orgullo a ello. A mediodía es usted mía: la presentaré a la señora Mountstuart como mía, como la dama de mi vida y de mi casa. ¡Y al mundo! No la dejaré ir.

—¿Me retendrá aquí, sir Willoughby?

—La retendré. Usaré la fuerza y la astucia. No escatimaré nada.

Deliró por un término, como había hecho toda la noche.

Quedándose sin aliento, Leticia dijo:

—¿No me pide amor?

—No. Le hago el cumplido superior de pedirla a *usted,* con amor o sin él. Mi amor será suficiente. Con o sin recompensa. No estoy acostumbrado a las negativas.

—Pero ¿sabe usted lo que está pidiendo? ¿Recuerda lo que le he dicho de mí misma? Soy dura, materialista; he perdido la fe en el romance, el esqueleto me acompañará de por vida. Mi salud no es muy buena. Anhelo el dinero. Me casaría por ser rica. No haré de usted un culto. Sería una carga, apenas viva, irresponsable y fría. ¿Se imagina usted una esposa así, sir Willoughby?

—¡Será usted!

Leticia trató de recordar cómo habría sonado eso en sus oídos tiempo atrás. Su pecho se hinchó y sintió un abatimiento absoluto. Había gastado su munición de argumentos contra él durante la noche.

—Es usted implacable —dijo.

—¿Soy yo quien lo es?

—Usted no me conoce.

—Pero usted es la única mujer en todo el mundo que me conoce, Leticia.

—¿Cree que es mejor para usted que lo conozcan?

Willoughby estaba a punto de decir otras palabras: las reprimió.

—Creo que no me conozco a mí mismo. Cualquiera que sea su voluntad, deme su mano; démela; confíe en mí: usted me guiará. Si tengo faltas, ayúdeme a corregirlas.

—¿No espera de mí que las considere virtudes de hombres más mezquinos?

—Será usted mi esposa.

Leticia se apartó de él y exclamó:

—¡Su esposa, su crítico! ¡Oh! No creo que sea posible. Llame a las señoritas. Que me oigan.

—Ahora mismo —dijo Willoughby, abriendo la puerta.

Estaban en una de las habitaciones superiores esperando ansiosamente.

—Queridas señoritas —les dijo Leticia al entrar—. Voy a herirlas y me apena hacerlo, pero mejor ahora que después si voy a vivir con ustedes. Willoughby me pide una mano que no puede aportar un corazón, porque el mío está muerto. Lo repito. Solía pensar en el corazón como la parte que una mujer aporta al matrimonio para el marido. Ahora veo que ella puede consentir, y él aceptarla, sin corazón. Pero es justo que ustedes sepan a qué voy a dar mi consentimiento. Una vez fui una boba muchacha romántica; ahora soy una mujer enferma y todas las ilusiones se han desvanecido. La privación ha hecho de mí lo que una fortuna abundante suele hacer de los demás. Soy una Egoísta. No las engaño. Ese es mi verdadero carácter. Mi perspectiva juvenil de Willoughby ha cambiado por completo y soy casi indiferente al cambio. Puedo esforzarme por respetarlo; no puedo venerarlo.

—¡Querida niña! —se lamentaron dulcemente las señoritas.

Willoughby se acercó a ellas.

—Si vamos a vivir juntas, y yo podría vivir muy feliz con ustedes —siguió diciéndoles Leticia— deben conocerme. Y si ustedes, como imagino, lo adoran ciegamente, no sé cómo vamos a vivir juntas. No han de marcharse para dejarme sitio. Tengo ojo de detective. Veo muchas faltas.

—¿No las tenemos todos, querida niña?

—No como las tiene él, aunque puedan alegarse las excusas de un caballero nutrido en la idolatría. Pero él debe saber que se ven, y que las ve aquella a quien le pide que sea su esposa, para que no haya ningún malentendido y mientras haya tiempo de que consulte sus sentimientos. Willoughby se adora a sí mismo.

—¿Willoughby?

—Es vengativo.

—¿Nuestro Willoughby?

—Esa no es su opinión, señoritas. Es firmemente la mía. El tiempo me la ha enseñado. Si ustedes y yo

no estamos de acuerdo, ¿cómo podemos vivir juntas? Es una imposibilidad.

Las señoritas miraron a Willoughby, que asintió imperiosamente.

—Nunca hemos afirmado que nuestro querido sobrino esté libre de faltas. Si lo han ofendido... Suponiendo que pretenda destacar, ¿no es una exigencia legítima, que la generosidad ha hecho buena? Reflexione, querida Leticia. Nosotras también somos sus amigas.

Leticia no podía seguir reprendiendo a las señoritas.

—Siempre han sido buenas amigas para mí.

—¿No tiene otro cargo contra él?

Leticia fue mucho más suave al decir:

—Es implacable.

—Ponga un ejemplo, Leticia.

—Ha expulsado a Crossjay de esta casa y le ha prohibido al pobre muchacho que vuelva a entrar.

—Crossjay —dijo Willoughby— era culpable de una infame traición.

—Que es la causa de que usted me persiga para hacerme su esposa.

Hubo una exclamación con «¡Persiga!».

—De ningún joven que se comporte tan vilmente puede salir nada bueno —dijo Willoughby, cuyo rostro se llenó de manchas rojas por los azotes que estaba recibiendo.

—Honestamente —siguió Leticia—. Crossjay habló de sí mismo y se anticipó al castigo que encontraría. Debería haber estado estudiando con un maestro de su profesión. Ha sido retenido aquí, en una ociosidad relativa, para ser alternativamente domesticado y descartado, sin otro amigo que Vernon Whitford, un caballero pobre condenado a ganarse la vida con la literatura. Sé algo de esa lucha. Es demasiado para mí.

—Crossjay está perdonado —dijo Willoughby.

—¿Lo promete?

—Lo enviaremos enseguida con un profesor.

—Pero mi hogar ha de ser el hogar de Crossjay.

—Usted es la dueña de mi casa, Leticia.

Ella vaciló. Sus pestañas se humedecieron.

—Puede ser generoso.

—¡Lo es, querida niña! —exclamaron las señoritas—. Lo es. Olvide sus errores por su generosidad, como hacemos nosotras.

—Está ese desgraciado, Flitch.

—Ese bobo lleva años diciendo por el condado el mal carácter que tengo —dijo Willoughby.

—Habría sido generoso por su parte ofrecerle otra oportunidad. Tiene hijos.

—Nueve. ¿Soy responsable de ellos?

—Hablo de ser generoso.

—Dicte —Willoughby extendió sus brazos.

—¿Está satisfecha ahora, Leticia? —dijeron las señoritas.

—¿Lo está *él?*

Willoughby divisó el carruaje de la señora Mountstuart bajando por la avenida.

—Completamente.

Le ofreció su mano.

Ella elevó las suyas con los dedos encogidos antes de dejar de hablar y dejó caer:

—Señoritas, son testigos de que no hay ocultación ni reserva por mi parte. Que el cielo me conceda ojos más amables que los que ahora tengo. No querría que cambiaran la opinión que tienen de él, sino que vieran cómo lo interpreto yo. Por lo demás, prometo cumplir mis deberes con él. Lo que hay en mí de digno está a su servicio. Estoy muy cansada. Siento que debo descansar o me derrumbaré. Es su deseo y me someto.

—Y yo saludo a mi esposa —dijo Willoughby, haciendo suya su mano y mostrándose cálido con su posesión al hacerlo.

La indecente prisa de la señora Mountstuart por llegar a la casa antes de la partida del doctor Middleton y su hija afligió a Willoughby con visiones del contraste físico que había sido tan agudamente perceptible para ella esta mañana entre su Leticia y Clara.

Pero ¡él tenía a la mujer con cerebro! La tenía e iba a aprender la naturaleza de esa posesión en la mujer que es nuestra esposa.

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62 Brocken, en el Harz alemán, es una montaña asociada a las prácticas de brujería. (Probablemente Meredith tomara la referencia de Coleridge.) Graymalkin y Paddock son nombres de las brujas mencionados en la primera escena de *Macbeth* de Shakespeare.

63 *Dear,* en inglés, se usa indistintamente para el masculino y el femenino.

L

En el que cae el telón

«SENTIDO común sobre la cuestión del matrimonio es lo que les pido al hombre y a la mujer para impedir más de una tragedia».

Esas fueron las palabras del doctor Middleton en respuesta a la breve explicación de Willoughby.

No dijo que lo había demostrado paternalmente mientras la tragedia era amenazadora o al menos había peligro de un descenso precipitado desde los niveles de la comedia. Los padres de hombres y mujeres en himeneo no pueden considerarse *dramatis personæ* . Tampoco mencionó ciertos pesares simpáticos que albergó al contemplar la salud del señor Dale, para quien, pobre caballero, el ofrecimiento de una botella del oporto de Patterne sería una burla egregia. Caminaba de un lado para otro, ansioso por partir, y parecía complacerle más la compañía del coronel De Craye que la de ningún otro. El coronel De Craye lo cortejaba asiduamente, le contaba anécdotas, se mostraba deferente, encantadoramente vivaz, el tipo mismo del hombre que al reverendo doctor le gustaba tener por compañía cuando se hundía en los ajetreos de los preliminares de un viaje.

—Sería usted un jovial camarada de viaje, señor —observó, y habló de su condena de llevar a su hija a los Alpes y los lagos alpinos durante los meses de verano.

Por extraño que parezca, los Alpes, durante los meses de verano, eran el proyecto del coronel.

Y de ahí el doctor Middleton pasó a los rincones habitables del norte de Italia en pleno verano.

También eso había sido trazado en el mapa del coronel De Craye.

—Partimos en junio, me han dicho —dijo el doctor Middleton.

Junio, milagrosamente, era el mes que había fijado el coronel.

—Confío en que nos encontremos, señor —dijo.

—Lo anotaré de buen grado en mi catálogo de placeres —respondió el reverendo doctor—, pues, en realidad, es previsible que me quede solo.

—¿París, Estrasburgo, Basilea? —preguntó el coronel.

—El lago de Constanza, me han dicho —dijo el doctor Middleton.

El coronel De Craye acechó pacientemente una oportunidad para intercambiar un par de sílabas con la tercera y más hermosa parte de esa gloriosa y próxima expedición.

Willoughby se encontró con él y recompensó la franqueza del coronel diciéndole que esperaba a la señorita Middleton para despedirse de ella, proporcionándole así la ocasión. Condujo a su amigo al Salón Azul, donde Clara y Leticia estaban sentadas, semiabrazadas y conversando, y dio una excusa para llevarse a Leticia. Unos minutos después, la señora Mountstuart llamó en voz alta al coronel para marcharse. Willoughby, cuyos buenos oficios no se veían mermados por los servicios que prestaba a cada uno, la condujo al Salón Azul y la oyó decir:

—¿Va a pasar conmigo el día con una cara como esa?

Clara le salió al paso y la detuvo.

De Craye salió.

—¿En qué estás pensando? —dijo Willoughby.

—Estaba pensando —dijo el coronel— en empezar a tener un corazón y ponerme a pensar en los demás.

—¡Por fin!

—¡Ah eres un verdadero amigo, Willoughby, un verdadero amigo, y además un primo!

—¿Qué? ¿Clara se ha mostrado habladora?

—El itinerario de un viaje que la señorita Middleton va a emprender.

—¿Te unirás a ellos?

—Sería delicioso, desde luego, pero tengo un montón de pólvora que quiero gastar y se me ha ocurrido recorrer la costa con mi rifle y disparar a las gaviotas, lo que será una forma inofensiva de cometer parricidio y matricidio y fratricidio, pues esa es mi familia y yo vengo de ella: ¡la gaviota! He de hablar firmemente con la señora Mountstuart de algo durante doce horas, calculando que se va a la cama a medianoche: no apostaría por ello, tal es la energía de las damas de esa edad.

Willoughby despreciaba al hombre que no podía ocultar un golpe, aunque se burlara de su turbación.

—¡Gaviota! —musitó.

—Un ave fácil de atrapar, mejor para relleno que para comer —dijo De Craye—. Perderás a tu primo.

—Tengo —replicó Willoughby— alguien que ocupará con creces su lugar.

Se produjo una confusión en el vestíbulo durante un rato y una asamblea de la casa se reunió para presenciar la partida del doctor Middleton y de su hija. El doctor Corney se había llevado a Vernon tras haber recomendado descanso al señor Dale y prometer tener a la vista a Crossjay durante el camino.

—Creo que lo encontrará usted en la estación y, si lo hace, ordénele que vuelva directamente aquí —le dijo Leticia a Clara.

La respuesta fue un afectuoso apretón de manos, que Clara extendió a Willoughby, que se inclinó ante ella con perfecta cortesía, diciéndole adiós.

Así se cortó el nudo. El carruaje de la señora Mountstuart, que transportaba a la gran dama y al coronel De Craye, siguió al del doctor Middleton.

—Le pido que no ponga esa cara conmigo —le dijo—. He tenido que separar, lo que odio, y ya tengo bastante que soportar, y ha de divertirme o lo dejaré a usted y enrolaré a ese pequeño paisano suyo, con el que puedo contar con que sea profesionalmente restaurador. ¿Quién puede sondear el corazón de una muchacha? ¡Lady Busshe tiene razón en esto una vez más! Y yo estaba equivocada. Ha de ser jugadora por naturaleza. Yo no habría arriesgado una conjetura como esa. Coronel De Craye, alarga usted su cara de una manera extraordinaria, la distorsiona a propósito.

—Madam —respondió De Craye—, nuestro ejército se jacta de no dar a conocer cuándo lo han derrotado y eso habla de soldados de gran corazón. Pero hay un campo donde el britano debe confesar su derrota, sonriendo o llorando, y no estoy tan seguro de que un breve aullido no le haga honor.

—Estoy segura de que estaba enamorada de Vernon todo el tiempo, coronel De Craye.

—¡Ah! —dijo el coronel—. Me he dado cuenta de que no era el caballero que me interesaba. A la dama no le fue difícil prometerle al amigo Willoughby que no se casaría con nadie más [64] .

—¡Las muchachas son insondables! Y lady Busshe —sé que no lo hizo por carácter— disparó una de sus conjeturas al azar y ha triunfado. No sabremos todo. Y yo tenía todas las oportunidades. He de confesar que las tenía.

—Por azar, madam —dijo maliciosamente De Craye—, ¿le insinuó usted a Willoughby que ella se volviera a Vernon Whitford?

—No —dijo la señora Mountstuart—. No soy una malhechora. La aspiración del condado es mantenerlo enamorado de sí mismo o es probable que Patterne sea tan aburrido como lo era sin una dama entronizada. Cuando su orgullo está tranquilo es un príncipe. Entiendo a los hombres. Coronel De Craye, se lo ruego, anímese.

—Estaría más animado, me temo, si usted se lo hubiera insinuado a Willoughby. Pero es usted magnánima, madam, y la venganza por un golpe en el juego del amor demuestra que somos indignos de ganar.

La señora Mountstuart lo amenazó con su sombrilla.

—Prohíbo los sentimientos, coronel De Craye. Preceden siempre a los suspiros.

—Deme cinco minutos de recogimiento y estaré a sus órdenes, madam —dijo.

Antes de que acabara el plazo, De Craye se mostraba encantador con la señora Mountstuart que, en consecuencia, volvió a su ingenio natural.

Así, y de una manera universal, el mundo de su temible e inconsciente culto se movió hacia sir Willoughby Patterne y su cambio de prometida hasta que los preparativos de las festividades de la boda hicieron que brillara a ojos del condado con el esplendor que había mostrado el gran día de su mayoría de edad. Eso fue hacia la época en que dos enamorados se encontraron entre los Alpes suizos y los tiroleses, sobre el lago de Constanza. A su lado, la musa cómica es seria y fraternal. Pero, al echar una mirada al resto de la compañía de actores, aprieta los labios.

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64 En la edición de 1897, Meredith borró lo siguiente: «Ahora bien, ¿habría juzgado usted, habría podido, por su fisonomía que era una muchacha que podría enamorarse de un hombre como el señor Whitford? A juzgar por la mitología, madam, habría sospechado del dios Marte».

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